

Canada's role in Afghanistan reliant on U.S.

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Prime Minister Harper announced some time ago that Canada "will withdraw the bulk of its troops (from Afghanistan) in 2011." The Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Walt Natynczyk, ordered his staff to inventory equipment and figure out what to bring back to Canada. Earlier this month the UN announced it would relocate 600 personnel following an attack on their living quarters in Kabul.

At the same time there have been statements indicating that Canadian "provincial reconstruction teams" (PRTs), police and military training teams, and other non-combatant personnel will remain after the troops leave. No one has explained how the PRTs and trainers can do anything in the absence of security provided by soldiers.

Taliban attacks on civilian aid agencies are politically effective because western democracies are casualty-averse, especially regarding civilians. When conditions are dangerous, civilian agencies are simply unable to operate and yet to be effective they must be dispersed among a potentially unfriendly population.

By announcing a troop withdrawal along with the continued presence of Canadian aid workers--an impossible combination --opponents of the Canadian military presence in Afghanistan conclude that the government has a hidden agenda to keep the troops in theatre beyond 2011; supporters of the Afghan mission conclude that the government strategy lacks coherence. Matters are made even murkier by media emphasis on dramatic ramp ceremonies for Canadian soldiers or on the questionable aspects of Afghan political life-- election frauds, an economy based on opium and foreign aid, and the return of the warlords--rather than the more pedestrian successes of road-building or the provision of medical services.

This imbalance was noted in the Manley Report last year, and is unlikely to change, ever. The fact is democracies, including Canada, have always had problems fighting and winning wars of choice. Canadian interests are involved in Afghanistan, not least of all supporting our only ally that matters, but the existence of our country is not at stake. We can always leave but the Taliban has nowhere to go, except perhaps to Pakistan, there to rest, train, and regroup. In short, the enemy has a strategic advantage because it has so much invested in the struggle. They are working within a longer time horizon than we are; unlike us, they are unlikely to change their minds despite our tactical advantages in firepower.

These basic facts underlie why public support for the mission in Canada, the U.S., and in Europe has declined precipitously. This raises an interesting question: will we be missed even if we pull out before 2011? Consider the following statistic. For the past several years Canada has maintained fewer than 3,000 troops as part of Task Force Kandahar. The American commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal has asked for an additional 40,000 troops to reinforce the 68,000 Americans already there. In other words, what counts in Afghanistan is American strategy not the presence of Canadian or even NATO troops.

Unfortunately, American policy-makers look as confused as Canadian ones. McChrystal seeks to apply the lessons learned from fighting a successful counterinsurgency in Iraq, but Afghanistan is bigger, less hospitable, and lacks the social coherence provided by local tribal leadership in Iraq that made political and financial accommodation possible. In short, it is unclear whether an Afghanistan "surge" can deliver similar results.

Moreover, American civilian leadership has broader questions to consider. U.S. National Security Advisor, Gen. James Jones, declared in October that al-Qaeda was defeated in Afghanistan. If so, the political reason for the original invasion has disappeared. So what are U.S. troops going to do? Like Canadian ones, they will fight the Taliban, train the Afghans, and oppose militant Islamists, all worthwhile tasks, but still evidence of mission creep.

This is why some Obama advisers, concerned about a "quagmire," consider the surge a fool's game. Hardnosed realists have argued, even if it works, the opportunity costs are excessive. Putting soldiers into an Afghanistan surge means they are unavailable to meet geopolitical challenges elsewhere.

This unresolved American debate matters to Canadians because what is decided there will strongly influence, and perhaps determine, what Canada does.

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