

Conversion of Afghan mission reflects bipartisan cooperation Decision to maintain training presence in Afghanistan would sustain Canada's reputation as a reliable ally and honour sacrifices made

DEREK H. BURNEY

The Vancouver Sun
13, 2010

Indications that Canada intends to convert its combat role to a military-training role in Afghanistan reflect a healthy, albeit rare, degree of bipartisan cooperation in Ottawa.

The process of consensus may not have been pretty -- the fact that the Conservatives now seem to be moving to a position publicly advocated by the Liberals suggests some convergence, if not consensus, between the two -- but the result, if confirmed, represents a salutary outbreak of adult judgment by both major parties.

Our independent panel observed in January 2008 that the basic aim of Canadian policy was to "leave Afghanistan to Afghans in a country better governed, more peaceful and more secure." Progress toward this objective has been decidedly mixed with positive movement on some fronts, notably the military, thanks to a strengthened U.S. presence, but less so on others.

However, the fundamental goal remains the same and Canada's decision would be a prudent step in the right direction.

Training is vital to an ultimate handover of responsibility for security to the Afghans. NATO has an urgent need for military and police trainers in Afghanistan, which Canada is, as a result of its heavy combat role in Kandahar, more capable than many to provide.

There is, of course, good reason to believe that Canada has "already done

enough," certainly more than its share, in Afghanistan and paid a heavy price in this difficult mission.

Similarly, there is good reason to be frustrated with the ineffective, even irrational, governance of President Hamid Karzai.

The fatigue and frustration are understandable, but should not obviate either the sacrifices or expenditures to date -- or the broader consequences for Canadian international interests. It would appear that the latter, particularly the counsel of key allies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, ultimately prevailed over concerns about internal, Afghan deficiencies.

A bipartisan consensus, however informal or ragged, is enabling the government to put alliance and foreign-policy interests above narrow, domestic politics.

That in itself, is refreshing.

Parliamentary debate on Canada's role in Afghanistan has too frequently succumbed to partisan posturing and puerile sniping. There has been little serious debate on the strategy at play in the increasingly complex military engagement -- the largest for Canada since the Korean War.

Yet, on major issues of war and peace, Canadians desire and expect to see a bipartisan approach that puts national interests ahead of political point-scoring.

Helping to build a more stable, better-governed Afghanistan with a growing economy remains the fundamental objective. Few, if any, want to see Afghanistan backslide into repressive Taliban rule. Quite apart from alliance preferences about our future military deployment, it would be difficult to envisage how Canada could maintain its substantial development-assistance role and civilian presence in Afghanistan without some semblance of security support. The chronic tensions involving Pakistan and Iran put a premium on greater stability in Afghanistan.

Canada has earned prominent recognition among its principal allies for its comprehensive (and costly) effort in Afghanistan. This new-found credibility should not be squandered.

We have consistently called for clearer, more comprehensive strategies and for better co-ordination of the overall effort in Afghanistan by the international community, the Afghan authorities and other governments in the region. Against that background, an abrupt and complete military withdrawal would have made little sense.

The need for a careful collaboration and co-ordination of decisions on military employment is at the root of the alliance's *raison d'être*. Once taken, however, the decision should be articulated clearly so that it will resonate intelligibly as a considered expression of Canada's national and global interests, based on analysis, not on partisan concerns of the moment.

Agreed time frames are also needed, tied to strategic assessments of what is happening on the ground, as opposed to unilateral withdrawals based on domestic political calculations. But, for this, some degree of bilateral cooperation is essential.

The commitment from some NATO allies has been ragged and inadequate and this could have been an easy excuse for Canada to withdraw altogether -- easy, but inconsistent, with Canada's military tradition and its foreign-policy track record. The war is complicated, debilitating and, at times, seemingly futile.

Success is not a certainty and any new commitment should not be open-ended; but a decision to maintain a significant training presence in Afghanistan would honour the sacrifice to date and sustain Canada's reputation as a reliable ally committed to deliver on a UN-sanctioned mandate.

Derek H. Burney, a former member of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, is Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) and Senior Strategic Adviser to Ogilvy Renault LLP.