

The future of the Canadian Armed Forces

NATIONAL POST EDITORIAL BOARD

National Post
March 8, 2010

Last Thursday's budget should silence the doubters: Canada's mission in Afghanistan will end in 2011. While some had suspected that Stephen Harper's government might find a way to maintain a troop presence there, either by deploying a smaller contingent of troops on a rebranded mission or by appearing to be talked into it by Barack Obama, the budget makes clear that drawing down the war in Afghanistan and slowing the rate of military expenditures, will form a key part of the Conservative government's plans to slay the deficit.

The Canadian military must now learn to make do with a budget that, while continuing to grow, will leave it with less fiscal room to plan and undertake missions than it originally had expected. One possible source of inspiration is a report released last week by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, titled *Whatever Happened to Peacekeeping: The Future of a Tradition*.

The report lays out the history of peacekeeping and does not gloss over some of its more notable failures, including the catastrophic Rwandan Genocide in 1994. It does find, however, that the United Nations has learned from its mistakes: More recent UN missions, conducted by heavily armed troops operating under robust mandates, have proven successful at restoring or imposing peace. The current UN mission in south Lebanon, where a large, primarily European force is maintaining a buffer between Israel and Hezbollah, is cited as an example of the UN's new kind of "peace operation" mission — large, powerful and with the necessary political support to intervene decisively.

Nevertheless, the report takes on the near-mythical status that peacekeeping has acquired in the Canadian collective psyche. After all, it was a Canadian, then-foreign minister Lester B. Pearson, who proposed in 1956 that a UN force separate hostile Israeli and Egyptian forces, ending the Suez Crisis. And Canadians, from individual observers to entire battlegroups, have served in almost every peacekeeping mission since. The concept of the Canadian soldier as a neutral observer, unaligned with any faction in global affairs and only there to help, was always a fiction for a country inextricably bound to the Western bloc, but it was a popular one with many Canadians, particularly those disinclined to favour large military expenditures and the always messy business of geopolitical brinkmanship.

Ironically, just as the notion of the Canadian as a peacekeeper was becoming a part of our national identity, the very nature of peacekeeping was changing. Two generations ago, peacekeepers were lightly armed observers, whose very vulnerability lent them the necessary moral authority to effectively adjudicate between two once-warring states. The combatants were sovereign nations that genuinely wanted a cessation of hostilities. Both sides generally took it upon themselves to ensure the safety of the peacekeepers as an integral part of showing their goodwill and support of the peace process.

In more recent times, however, in the era of failed states and rogue terrorist organizations, peacekeeping has become virtually indistinguishable from warfare, with the attendant rise in military casualties and collateral damage to civilians. Our government and military leaders, too fearful of a public backlash to effectively communicate the new reality of peacekeeping — or peacemaking — to the masses, has instead created confusion, as Canadians taught to believe that our troops are impartial observers ride into pitched battles in tanks, backed by artillery and air power. Putting off these weighty discussions any further is unacceptable.

Despite the recently announced slow-down in military expenditures, the Canadian Forces are still one of the world's elite forces, capable of independently projecting power across great distances and maintaining it there as long as the political will remains. And so our allies, the United States in particular, likely will

want us on board as partners in any future Afghanistan-like war (of which we doubt there will be any shortage in coming decades). The recent relief mission in Haiti, which saw thousands of Canadian soldiers rapidly deploy aboard warships and sophisticated C-17 aircraft to provide humanitarian aid and security, is another example of the sort of mission for which Canadians will be needed.

We need to make choices now about what sort of force we want to be able to project after our withdrawal from Kandahar. With military priorities in flux and budget uncertainty returning to the forefront of the military's mind, decisions made in the short term will have major implications. It is now all but certain that the replacement of some of the military's existing hardware will be postponed or cancelled outright, so decisions made now for reasons of fiscal necessity will have profound implications as to what role Canada is capable of taking on internationally for decades.

Traditional peacekeeping, whether under a United Nations, NATO or regional mandate, is a laudable mission and something that our Forces can excel in. If that is to be our military's future, then the government owes it to all Canadians, civilians and military alike, to begin making the necessary choices now to ensure that we are the very best peacekeepers that can be. If, however, as we feel is more likely and proper, the Conservative government prefers to balance our military's future duties between international aid missions and the advancement of Canada's legitimate national interests, it would be well advised to consider carefully how best to go about tightening the budgetary reins while still leaving the Canadian Forces as a potent, flexible instrument of national policy and humanitarian relief.