

NATO exercise and C-17s hint at bold new Canadian role

By Bob Bergen

Stephen Harper's Conservative government appears poised to boldly place Canada on the world stage with an announcement it will acquire Boeing C-17 Globemaster cargo jets for its military.

Harper may or may not be at CFB Trenton Thursday when it is expected Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor will announce the purchase of four or perhaps more of the strategic heavy lift C-17s and perhaps up to 16 Lockheed-Martin Hercules short-haul cargo planes, but he should be.

With the C-17 announcement, Harper's government will give Canada the ability to play an elite new role in the fledgling North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) rapid reaction force that has been four years in the making and which could be fully operational by October.

This would be an unprecedented Canadian foreign policy development that, in one brilliant stroke, ought to please both the hawks in the global war on terrorism and the advocates of kinder, gentler military contributions such as humanitarian relief.

How is that possible?

Look to the largely-unheralded NATO Reaction Force (NRF-7) Exercise Steadfast Jaguar that began last Friday on a wind-swept beach far from Canadian eyes on the Cape Verde island of Sao Vicente, off Africa's west coast.

There, some 7,800 NRF-7 air force, sea and land troops from a dozen NATO nations staged their first ever rapid-reaction response, part of which involved a mock assault by Turkish forces on a terrorist camp. Steadfast Jaguar is a largely a "political" exercise aimed at demonstrating that NRF-7 is more than capable of conducting strategic operations in the war on terror outside the normal sphere of member countries' military influence with five days' notice and for up to 30 days at a time.

Canadians are right in the middle of Steadfast Jaguar.

Canadian Commodore Denis Rouleau, aboard the Canadian destroyer HMCS Athabaskan, commands the German-based Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG 1) squadron of six to 10 destroyers and frigates from as many nations.

Ordinarily, the squadron trains and operates in the North Atlantic Ocean and in the North and Mediterranean seas.

However, earlier this year, the Athabaskan took part as the flagship in Exercise Brilliant Mariner involving 64 ships from 18 NATO countries in the North Sea and waters adjacent to Denmark which certified the SNMG 1 ready for participation in the NRF-7.

Rouleau and the Athabaskan are now about 80 kilometers off Africa's west coast commanding a group of seven alliance destroyers and corvettes engaged in the larger 21-ship naval component of Exercise Steadfast Jaguar.

The SNMG 1 group is involved in anti-submarine warfare and maritime interdictions.

According to Canadian Cmdr. Chris Dickinson aboard the Athabaskan, one of the exercise's scenarios involves a submarine engaged in weapons smuggling.

Other elements of the exercise last week saw Turkish special air and land forces conduct an amphibious landing on Flamingo Beach and surround two terrorist camps.

A second multinational element of Steadfast Jaguar involved a humanitarian rescue mission.

In that scenario, elements of NRF-7 were deployed to help evacuate 60 of Fogo Island's 1,000 residents threatened by a simulated eruption of a 3,000-metre volcano which dominates the island. It actually erupted in 1951 and 1995.

However, one of the major logistics hurdles that had to be overcome during the early stages of Exercise Steadfast Jaguar was a lack of strategic or heavy airlift.

As a result, NATO resorted to Russian cargo planes to fly in heavy equipment.

An absence of strategic airlift is a similar age-old problem for Canada's combat and humanitarian missions.

That lack of lift delayed the Canadian air force deployment to Aviano, Italy, in 1998 prior to the Kosovo air war.

Canada also needed to rent or borrow strategic lift for humanitarian missions to Rwanda in 1994, for the response to the South Asian tsunami in 2005 and for earthquake relief in Pakistan and Turkey.

Acquiring such strategic lift will not only solve Canada's long-standing deployment problems, but it may

well offer a solution to NATO's own dilemma in the event American or Russian heavy lift aircraft are not available.

That was a point not lost on NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer who spoke about two weeks ago at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

Mr. de Hoop Scheffer addressed the NRF-7 exercise in Cape Verde, but did not directly mention the strategic lift problem of which he must have been well aware.

Rather, he referred obliquely to NATO's "current plans to acquire greater access to strategic airlift."

Then Mr. de Hoop Scheffer acknowledged Canada's intent to acquire just that capability, in addition to significantly boosting defence spending.

The Harper government's plans to buy C-17s may well have been the world's worst-kept secret, but ultimately NATO will be stronger, humanitarian missions will go smoother and Canada will once again be a well-respected member of the international community as a result.

This good news is long overdue.

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