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Unstable world needs Canadian Forces' combat capabilities

Leave it to the Liberals and the NDP to view the Stephen Harper government's purchase of 120 second-hand Leopard tanks to replace Canada's aging fleet of Leopard C2 tanks as an escalation of the Afghanistan mission.

Parliament's approved mission is due to end in February 2009 and whether Canada stays there longer or not, depending on a parliamentary vote, Canada will still need those tanks.

It is actually refreshing that the Conservatives are rebuilding the Canadian Forces after the Liberal-dominated 1990s and are looking at defence needs at least over a 15-year time frame. Why? Around 2017, a replacement – and it may well be the futuristic Joint Strike Fighter – will be needed for Canada's rebuilt-but-aging fleet of CF-18 fighter/bombers which have about 10 years left on their airframes.

In the same way, the navy is now pushing the government to order new ships to come into service in 2020 to replace its Iroquois-class destroyers and Halifax-class frigates.

They aren't doing that because Canada is escalating a mission.

The fact is Canada will need a combat-capable air force 20 years from now, just as it will need a combat-capable army equipped with tanks, a combat-capable blue-water navy and perhaps even an ice-capable navy for patrolling Canadian Arctic waters.

Anyone who says Canada won't is just as guilty of thundering geo-strategic naivety as my Calgary newspaper editor in 1991.

He assigned me to ask Brig.-Gen. Barry Ashton, commander of the 1 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group, why Canada needed combat-capable forces after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Gen. Ashton patiently explained that the world was much more unstable following the end of the Cold War and, of course, he was right.

That year, the former Yugoslavia spiraled into chaos and, in 1992, Canada deployed the first of 40,000 soldiers who eventually served in United Nations and NATO security and peace implementation forces in Croatia and Bosnia until 2004.

Meanwhile, Canadian CF-18s dropped some 500,000 pounds of bombs on Serbian military targets in Serbia and Kosovo in a 78-day NATO air war in 1999 that ended Serbian ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo.

During that period, successive Conservative and Liberal governments gutted the Canadian Forces, slashing the defence budget from \$12.83 billion in 1991-1992 to \$9.38 billion in 1998-1999 and reducing personnel from 83,000 to 60,000 in the name of the peace dividend and deficit cutting.

The rebuilding that the Canadian Forces desperately need and have embarked upon was necessitated by those years the Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier has correctly described as the "decade of darkness."

Still, Liberal defence critic Denis Coderre and NDP defence critic Dawn Black prefer to call the purchase of the used Leopard tanks an escalation in Afghanistan.

Heaven forbid Coderre and Black should contemplate destroyer, frigate, or CF-18 replacements, but they seem unable to view the world as far more dangerous since September 11, 2001.

For example: Why did Al-Qaeda suicide bombers target Algeria and Morocco last week and post pictures of its martyrs on the Internet?

That is because – like in New York and Washington on 9/11 – it could.

It would target Canada if it could, just as Al-Qaeda-inspired Taliban insurgents kill Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan when they can.

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban would like nothing more than to see Western nations pull out of Afghanistan because some of their publics are becoming squeamish over the loss of lives at the hands of suicide bombers who not only embrace death, they seek it out.

Elsewhere in the world, The New York Times reports that Iran's stand off with the United Nations Security Council over Iran's drive for nuclear technology has caused Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Yemen along with Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Al Fujayrah, Ras al Khaymah, Sharjah and Umm al Qaywayn to explore thinking about nuclear programs of their own to counter the Iranian threat.

Then there is North Korea which has snubbed its nose at the world with its nuclear and long-range missile programs.

What is the world to do facing not only Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but a rogue regime which prefers to see millions of its own people starve under sanctions than meet the international community's demands to shut down an atomic reactor?

This writer supports Canada, for one, continuing to acquire the needed tanks; continuing to rebuild the Forces; supporting diplomatic attempts to pressure Iranian and North Korean nuclear disarmament; and co-operating with our most important ally, the United States, on its ballistic missile defence program.

The Liberals' Coderre and NDP's Black might disagree but, like my former editor in 1991, they can't connect the dots.

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