

Afghanistan: Going...Going...Gone?

The latest opinion polls on the Canadian role in the Afghanistan War are very clear: support for the war is dropping as Canadians see the casualties rising and the prospects for quick success declining. A majority of those polled by EKOS and Ipsos-Reid want Canadian troops out by 2011, exactly as the House of Commons resolution in 2008 said. None of this means that the public does not support the troops; they do. Nor does it mean that Canadians want to cease efforts to help in the development work needed to bring Afghanistan into the modern world. But they do not want Canadian troops to continue their role in the fighting.

This is not an unreasonable position. Canada has been in Afghanistan since 2002 – in different roles to be sure, but present with armed troops on the ground (and now in the air too). The Canadian Forces have suffered 125 men and women killed and many more wounded in body and mind. The price has been high and, as the insurgency spikes this summer, reasonable citizens can raise hard questions about the long-term value and results of the mission.

The army too has its concerns. With only 20,000 soldiers in all, with a rotation of troops every six months, it has become a terrible struggle to find and train the battle groups we put in the field. Some soldiers are already doing their third rotation into Kandahar; by 2011, some may have completed five tours. Think of the effect of that on families at home and on the psyches of the soldiers. Moreover, the army's equipment in the field, its LAVs and Leopard tanks, are being worn down by continuous operation in harsh conditions. Improvised Explosive Devices not only kill soldiers, but they also batter equipment severely, and although the Canadian government has been very good in giving the troops what they need to fight the war, by 2011 men and equipment both will need rest and refurbishing.

But will it be as easy to get out as Parliament and the public want? First, there will be a sense on the part of the Afghans that Canada is cutting and running. That is painful to contemplate, given the blood and treasure already spent. Some of our NATO allies will use our departure as an excuse to do the same. That is galling, considering how little many NATO members have done in the war and the caveats that have kept most of those that have sent troops carefully out of harm's way.

And then there are the Americans. The Obama administration has made the Afghan War its own – out of Iraq (soon) and into Afghanistan (now). The U.S. Army is taking command of the fighting and NATO is being pushed off to the side, but Washington will still want allies. The pressures from the U.S. so far have been gentle; we can expect them to increase in 2010, and it will require some toughness for Ottawa to say no to President Obama. That Canada might have a general election in 2010 will only complicate matters.

So, what do we do? If the Canadian government stays on its present course of getting out in 2011 – and both the opinion polling and government statements suggest it will – the battle groups will come out, as planned. But what about the Provincial Reconstruction Team? Canadians approve of development assistance in Afghanistan, and the PRT delivers just that. Does it stay? And if it does, can it function without military protection?

And what about the Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (the wonderfully-named Omelets) that help train the Afghan National Army's kandaks or battalions? If the insurgency is to be defeated, the Afghan soldiers will be required to function at a high level. There will be support for keeping a substantial number of Canadian Forces trainers in the field. The same applies to the police mentors. There might even be government and public support for continuing to operate helicopters there to help the allied forces get off the IED-infested roads. If only Afghanistan had a coast, there would likely be support for sending a Canadian frigate or two!

So where will we be in and after 2011? No one can forecast the course of events in Kabul, Washington, and Ottawa with confidence two years ahead. But no one should assume that the Canadian military presence will end at one stroke. There will likely be OMLTs on the ground and soldiers protecting a continuing Provincial Reconstruction Team. There will be police trainers. There may be an air component.

So what does it come down to? That there will be Canadians in Kandahar for the foreseeable future.

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