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The Coalition, the Obama Administration, and the Canadian Forces

The Liberal/NDP/Bloc Québécois coalition may be, as columnist Mark Steyn observed, a horse with three rear ends, but there is still a real possibility, even with a less-than-enthusiastic Michael Ignatieff as leader, that it could take power after the vote on the Harper government's budget at the end of January. If so, what could this mean for relations with the United States and for the Canadian Forces?

The implications are serious, primarily because the level of governmental anti-Americanism, recently held in check, may well increase substantially if the coalition comes to power. The reasons are obvious: the New Democratic Party has always been soft on defence and has historically trafficked in anti-Americanism; the Bloc has used anti-Americanism when it suited its purposes which include pacifism and neutralism; and elements of the Liberals, up to and including foreign ministers and prime ministers, have not ordinarily been interested in the Canadian Forces and, when it suited party purposes, deliberately played the anti-American card.

This has serious implications for the Canadian Forces and for Canada's relations with the United States. In the first place, the re-equipment of the armed forces, already slowed by an unwieldy procurement system, may not proceed under the coalition. The acquisition of Joint Support Ships, Arctic patrol vessels, replacements for the Navy's aged destroyers and work on new ships to replace the Navy's frigates, the finalization of contracts for Chinook helicopters, Hercules C130J transports, unmanned aircraft, new fighters, a replacement for the Aurora surveillance aircraft, and new search and rescue aircraft, along with new trucks and light armoured vehicles – all have become stuck in the sclerotic processes of the Departments of National Defence and Public Works and could be killed. The Liberals have been lamentably soft on defence for the last forty years; there is little room for doubt that they will be even less interested in spending the very large sums that are necessary to restore the Canadian Forces if, dependent on NDP and Bloc support, they take over the government.

This will have a serious impact on relations with the Obama Administration which will surely want Canada to do more in Afghanistan and in North America. The coalition document affirmed that Canada will keep its troops in Kandahar until 2011, but to do what? Will the battle group will be allowed to fight? Or would a new coalition government oblige it to pursue the passive, purely defensive role wanted by the NDP and Bloc?

Moreover, President Obama cannot be less assertive in defending the American homeland than his predecessors. A Canadian government that pulls out of Afghanistan and retreats on re-equipping the weak Canadian Forces, therefore, will not win much favour in the new Washington. And this matters on virtually every issue that confronts Canada in the dramatically weakened continental economy. Could anyone doubt that the basis for a productive partnership in solving economic problems lies in persuading the new U.S. leadership that Canada is, and will remain, a reliable security partner?

An Ignatieff-led coalition may not take office next month. Even if it does not, the continuing Harper government will almost certainly be more constrained in its defence expenditures, such will be the demands for massive investments in economic stimulus in a recessionary climate, especially with a cocky Opposition. Defence investments are at least as stimulative as infrastructure repairs or house-building, more so in fact given the high-tech nature of military equipment. But the ideological and anti-military concerns of the coalition partners will likely not permit this thought to be entertained.

The result is that we can expect that the rebuilding of the military will be slowed, and it is entirely possible now that the Canadian Forces that leaves Kandahar in 2011 with its personnel and equipment battered and bruised will be weaker than the military that went into action there at the beginning of 2006. The new cadre of leaders that learned its trade on the Afghan battlefield will probably have little to work with in the second decade of the 21st Century.

Will the Canadian government, whether coalition or Conservative, recognize that the nation's defences need to be restored in Canada's own national interest? That a capable Canadian Forces is necessary, not only to meet the American demand for a secure continent, but also to further Canada's interests at home and abroad? The impact of the recent political crisis unfortunately has weakened the possibility that any Canadian government in the near-term future will be interested in following a rational national interest-based defence policy. Such a policy requires a strong, well equipped military, and the chance of that has decreased thanks to Canada's political and economic uncertainty.

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