

Afghanistan: The Canadian military mission

THE SPEECH FROM THE THRONE¹ THAT OPENED THE second session of Canada's 39th Parliament indicated the government's desire to extend the mission in Afghanistan to 2011, but it also said that future military deployments would be subject to a vote in Parliament.

Operation ATHENA² is the military component of Canada's "whole of government" mission in Afghanistan. It consists of Joint Task Force Afghanistan (JTF-AFG), a collection of various military capabilities that forms part of the 37-nation International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).³ The ISAF conducts operations under United Nations sanction, at the invitation of the Government of Afghanistan and under the operational direction of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). JTF-AFG assists the Afghan National Security Forces – the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police – in establishing a secure environment throughout Kandahar Province, to facilitate the delivery of reconstruction and development aid.

At the time of writing, 71 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have been killed in Afghanistan, and approximately 243 Canadian Forces (CF) personnel have been wounded. A groundswell of concern over mounting casualties has generated debate over the future of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan. This debate has tended to focus on two major issues: whether the entire mission should be withdrawn, either immediately or in February 2009; and, if the mission remains in place, whether it should include a "combat" component.

The Prime Minister recently appointed a high-level panel of eminent persons, chaired by the Honourable John Manley, to examine options for the future of the mission.⁴ The four options identified for consideration do not exclude the possible study of other relevant options. All options examined will likely have a bearing on the military component of the mission. The panel is due to report in January 2008.

Background

In early October 2001, for the first time in NATO's history, and in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the North Atlantic Council (NATO's senior political body) invoked Article 5 of the Treaty of Washington, which states that any attack on a NATO nation shall be interpreted as an attack on all.

Days later, then Prime Minister Chrétien announced that Canada would contribute military forces to the international coalition being formed to conduct a campaign against terrorism. Canada was the first coalition nation, after the US, to send warships into the Southwest Asia operational theatre, where they engaged in al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership interdiction operations. At its peak in January 2002, the Canadian Naval Task Group comprised six warships and about 1,500 Navy personnel. In November and December 2001, long-range transport aircraft and two surveillance and maritime patrol aircraft were deployed to provide reconnaissance and surveillance support.

Canada also deployed an infantry battle group of about 1,250 personnel to Kandahar in January 2002 as part of a US Army task force. In addition to providing security at Kandahar Airfield, Canadian troops engaged in combat operations against al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. Four Canadian soldiers were killed by "friendly-fire" from US aircraft. Canadian Army snipers were awarded US medals for their combat proficiency. The battle group came home in July 2002 and was not replaced.

The CF returned to Afghanistan in August 2003 with the deployment of a large (approximately 1,700 personnel) contingent to serve in ISAF. For nearly two years, Canada provided an infantry battle group and the command element of a multinational brigade to help establish security in Kabul. In 2003, Major General Andrew Leslie served as Deputy Commander of ISAF, followed by Lieutenant General Rick Hillier, who commanded ISAF from February to Au-

gust 2004. Over five successive six-month rotations, CF troops conducted foot patrols, surveillance missions throughout the ISAF area of responsibility, and armed raids on illegal weapons caches, as well as facilitating provincial, national and presidential elections. Three Canadian soldiers died in action during this period.

CF elements were redeployed from Kabul to the former Taliban heartland in Kandahar in August 2005 and took over duties with the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) from US forces. In February 2006, Canadian Brigadier General David Fraser took command of the Multi-National Brigade in Regional Command (South). With him came a Canadian infantry battle group to conduct operations against the Taliban in Kandahar Province, in an effort to establish a secure environment. These troops spent most of their tour in combat, eliminating the Taliban threat to Kandahar City and defeating armed concentrations of insurgent fighters elsewhere throughout Kandahar Province. In 2006, one diplomat and 36 Canadian soldiers were killed.

In the meantime, ISAF expanded its area of responsibility, replacing US Operation ENDURING FREEDOM forces on their departure. On 31 July 2006, Canadian troops, now operating throughout Kandahar Province, returned under the operational command of ISAF.

The current Canadian military mandate in Afghanistan

JTF-AFG headquarters are located at Kandahar Airfield, along with about 9,000 other international troops. The JTF-AFG area of operational responsibility extends throughout Kandahar Province. So far, in 2007 another 28 soldiers have died.

JTF-AFG military operations are directed by NATO-ISAF Regional Command (South) Headquarters, also located within Kandahar Airfield, and aim to establish a secure environment throughout Kandahar Province; to support operations of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police; and to extend the authority of the Government of Afghanistan throughout Kandahar Province. The current Commander of JTF-AFG, Brigadier General Guy Laroche, exercises both national and operational command over CF elements in Afghanistan, on behalf of the Chief of the Defence Staff. Brigadier General Laroche exercises national command in mat-

ters of national policy, administration and discipline. With regard to military operations, Canada has agreed to provide forces, without restrictive caveats, under operational command of NATO-ISAF; thus, Brigadier General Laroche receives operational orders from the Commander of ISAF Regional Command (South).⁵

The battle group. The mission's main combat element is a battle group of about 1,300 personnel, built on a designated infantry battalion and reinforced by many elements from other military units in various parts of Canada. It includes a tank squadron, an artillery battery, an armoured reconnaissance troop, a combat engineer squadron and a tactical uninhabited aerial vehicle unit.

The battle group operates in support of the Afghan National Army and in cooperation with other ISAF forces, throughout Kandahar Province, to establish a security presence and to eliminate armed concentrations of insurgents. This element has engaged in most of the combat operations and consequently has suffered most of the casualties. Those arguing for an end to the "combat" mission are essentially calling for the withdrawal of the battle group. If it is withdrawn, its security role throughout Kandahar Province will have to be taken up by an equivalent organization from another nation because, at this point, no one expects that the Afghan army or police will be able to fulfill the security role on their own at any time in the near future. During hearings on Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, conducted by the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence,⁶ not one witness believed that an adequately secure environment would be established throughout Kandahar Province by February 2009, even if the JTF-AFG battle group remained in place.

The provincial reconstruction team. Another major JTF-AFG element is the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT), one of 25 ISAF provincial teams throughout Afghanistan. The KPRT is composed of about 350 personnel, including CF elements, a political director from Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT), three development officers from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), two officers of Correctional Service Canada and nine civilian police led by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

An infantry company provides security, but the KPRT military component also includes military police, military project managers, civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) personnel, and medical and other support personnel. The infantry company provides local and point protection for KPRT officials as they go about their reconstruction and development duties throughout Kandahar Province. This company occasionally engages in combat, but on a more local level than the battle group. Nonetheless, in the course of their work the KPRT military personnel have suffered death and injury from insurgent attacks and from improvised explosive devices.

The KPRT helps to reinforce the authority of the Afghan government in Kandahar Province and facilitates delivery of reconstruction and development aid from a variety of international donors or contractors. For example, the US Agency for International Aid (USAID) is part of the KPRT, and there is also representation from the Afghan Ministry of the Interior. It is also important to know that the KPRT works to build Afghan *capacity*, rather than to do the work themselves, by putting an “Afghan face” on all projects. At the local level, KPRT experts meet with village *jurgas* (or *shuras*) — a gathering of village elders — to determine what Afghans want and need. The KPRT then facilitates the work to be done by Afghans.

Some of the options to be studied by the Manley committee involve a determined re-focusing on reconstruction and development. In any such case, augmenting the reconstruction or development personnel would require a commensurate increase in the military security element.

The operational mentor liaison team. Since early 2006, the Canadian Operational Mentor Liaison Team (OMLT – informally known as “omelette”) has been advising, mentoring and assisting Afghan National Army units in Kandahar Province. At present, the OMLT consists of approximately 150 CF personnel who are training approximately 1,000 Afghan soldiers of the 1st Brigade, 205th Corps, broken down into Kandaks (battalions) of about 350 soldiers each. Some CF personnel have also reinforced Canadian civilian police officers who are training the national police. CF mentors accompany their national army protégés in operations against insurgents.

The overall objective of the OMLT is to bring the Afghan army and police to a level where they can take over responsibility for the security and stability of local areas within Kandahar Province and extend the legitimate authority of the Government of Afghanistan. At some point, when these military and security forces are able to stand on their own, the CF will be able to withdraw from this important training role.

One of the options to be considered by the Manley committee involves the enhancement of this training program. The desirability of extending the OMLT until 2011 has also been noted in the recent Speech from the Throne. This would in be keeping with the terms of the Afghanistan Compact,⁷ to which Canada is a signatory.

Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan. Approximately 30 CF personnel serve in the US-led Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A).⁸ In partnership with the Government of Afghanistan and the international community, CSTC-A plans, programs and implements structural, organizational, institutional and management reforms of the Afghanistan National Security Forces. CSTC-A is not a NATO organization. It is a US-sponsored body operating under the auspices of the Afghan Compact. The CF also contribute 15 personnel to act as instructors in training Afghan army personnel at the Canadian Afghan National Training Centre Detachment (C ANTC Det) in Kabul.

Strategic Advisory Team – Afghanistan. Since September 2005, the CF have provided a Strategic Advisory Team – Afghanistan (SAT-A) to assist senior bureaucrats in Afghan government ministries. Its mission is to provide capacity-building assistance in direct support of senior leaders within the Government of Afghanistan. The SAT-A is a Canadian, not NATO, organization. It includes 15 CF members augmented by a CIDA officer to advise on development issues. Although the SAT-A is a military unit on an independent operation and is therefore legally responsible to the Chief of the Defence Staff, the team works in consultation with Canadian Ambassador Arif Lalani, the Canadian Head of Aid and a senior representative of the Afghan government. CF planners work under Afghan leadership within their partner Afghan government ministries and agencies.

JTF-AFG support elements. The JTF-AFG is supported by a number of headquarters elements and support personnel, including Health Support Service (HSS) workers, a 300-person National Command Element (NCE) and a 300-person National Support Element (NSE). Nearly 100 Canadians are serving in various positions in other NATO-ISAF headquarters in Kandahar and Kabul. There is also a 250-person Theatre Support Base elsewhere in Southwest Asia. If, in any future mission configuration, the battle group were removed from the organization, there could be a consequential downsizing in national support elements.

Issues

The Manley committee. Four options are to be studied by the Manley committee, although others could be examined if they are deemed relevant. The four identified options are:

- *Option 1: Continue training the Afghan army and police with the goal of creating a self-sufficient security force.* This activity is already underway, and larger OMLTs are planned for future troop rotations.
- *Option 2: Focus on Kandahar's reconstruction, passing on main security responsibilities to another foreign force.* This option would essentially see the Canadian battle group replaced by a foreign equivalent. Such a move would require sensitive negotiations within NATO.
- *Option 3: Move military operations and reconstruction efforts to other areas of Afghanistan.* This would necessarily be subject to NATO agreement and would have to be coordinated with the deployment of other national contingents already in place. Some sub-options might be available: e.g., taking over an entirely new area; replacing an existing national contingent; or taking up a position among existing national contingents.
- *Option 4: Withdraw Canadian forces altogether after February 2009, leaving only a small contingent to ensure security for diplomats.* This option is entirely a Canadian government decision that would effectively end Canadian participation in NATO-ISAF.

Caveats. Throughout most of 2007, Canada expressed discontent over the fact that some ISAF nations imposed national caveats on their forces in Afghanistan that prevented them from being redeployed to reinforce other national contingents, such as Canada's, who were carrying a heavy combat load in the southern provinces. Future options will need to be considered in light of whether they will have the effect of putting Canada on the list of nations that, by imposing inconvenient caveats on the use of its troops, are unable to come to the assistance of NATO allies and partners.

Focus of the debate. Much of the debate over the mission has been focused on a deadline for bringing the troops home. Only occasionally has the overarching need to identify clear objectives been discussed. Moreover, the issue of Canada's commitments to the Afghan people, undertaken when Canada signed the Afghan Compact, receives little attention. The June 2007 report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence made the point that proper strategic planning would start with a well-considered definition of the aim, followed by the development of an effective strategy and campaign plan to achieve it; in other words, future discussion should take into consideration objectives and strategy, and not just timelines.⁹

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SOURCES

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2. National Defence, Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, Internet site, http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/afghanistan/index_e.asp.
3. NATO, International Security Assistance Force, Internet site, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/index.html>.
4. Office of the Prime Minister, Prime Minister Harper announces independent advisory panel on Afghanistan mission, "News release, Ottawa, 12 October 2007, <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1853>.
5. Currently British Major General Page, who is supported by Deputy Commander, Regional Command South, Canadian Brigadier General Marquis Hainse. Of interest, Canada has

- Brigadier General Jim Ferron serving as the head of the ISAF headquarters intelligence staff in Kabul.
6. House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence. *Canadian Forces in Afghanistan*. Report, 1st Session, 39th Parliament, June 2007, http://cmte.parl.gc.ca/Content/HOC/committee/391/nddn/reports/rp3034719/391_NDDN_Rpt01_Pdf/391_NDDN_Rpt01_Pdf-e.pdf.
 7. The London Conference on Afghanistan. *The Afghanistan Compact*, London, 31 January – 1 February 2006, <http://www.and.s.gov.af/ands/I-ANDS/afghanistan-compacts-p1.asp>.
 8. Canadian Brigadier General Dennis Tabbernor currently serves as the CSTC-A Deputy Commanding General for Army Development, supported by a small number of CF personnel in CSTC-A headquarters in Kabul.
 9. *Canadian Forces in Afghanistan*, p. 59.