

Our Leopard tanks make the leap to Afghanistan

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The Stephen Harper government's decision to commit 15 Leopard tanks and some 120 crew and support troops to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan demonstrates refreshing new foreign policy leadership.

On a historic level, the decision to deploy Leopard tanks from the Edmonton-based Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) marks the first time tanks have been sent to an operational theatre in a combat role since the Korean War.

It is expected that the first draft of Strathcona's will leave Edmonton on September 26.

But, there are also related political, strategic and tactical issues that emerged – even as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defence chiefs were meeting in Poland and member nations in Brussels – while the Strathcona's were honing their tank combat skills at CFB Wainwright, Alberta, in early September.

At the political level, the decision to deploy the Strathcona's to Afghanistan is nothing less than Canada demonstrating to NATO that it is prepared to make the hard military choices over Afghanistan that set an example for the rest.

Exemplary muscular foreign policy? Leadership internationally from Canada?

This is breathtaking.

But there is more: At the strategic level, in order to transport the 42.5-tonne Leopards to Afghanistan, Canada needs the help of heavy long-distance airlift which underscored other Canadian foreign policy considerations.

In this case, according to Department of National Defence's Maj. John Diderich, senior public affairs officer for Canadian operational support command, Canada has asked the American military for help flying the Leopards overseas. The aircraft will either Boeing C-17 Globemasters or Lockheed's C-5 Galaxy.

The significance of the strategic lift considerations is that the Canadian government launched a procurement process in July to acquire four C-17s which would give the Forces the capability of deploying wherever and whenever they want, rather than relying on allies or private charter companies.

By acquiring C-17s, Canada would not only have a nascent strategic deployment capability, but, in the long run, would address a dearth of strategic lift within all of NATO evidenced by the difficulty in acquiring air lift for the Strathcona's.

At the tactical level, 15 Canadian tanks in Afghanistan will bring a level of military capability to NATO's war against the Taliban and their insurgent allies disproportionate to the 120 Strathcona's added to the 2,000 Canadians already there.

The importance of inserting Leopards into the Afghan conflict is the direct fire support offered by the tanks' 105-millimetre high-pressure guns.

With night-vision capability, laser-guided sighting and a muzzle velocity of 1,800 metres per second, the Leopards' high-explosive and armour-piercing rounds do not miss their targets.

When the Strathcona's were sighting the canons' bores at Camp Wainwright, their gunners consistently put rounds through the same hat-sized holes in targets 800 metres distant, adding fearsome destructive power to the Forces in Afghanistan while minimizing the risk of collateral damage.

The question has been put: Were the Canadians who were originally deployed without tanks provided with inferior equipment?

The answer is "no" in the most important case.

The main vehicle the infantry uses in Afghanistan, the Light Armoured Vehicle or LAV III, is a superior fighting machine.

It is an eight-wheeled 17-tonne armoured car, armed with a 25-millimetre cannon capable of transporting troops at speeds of up to 100 km/h.

The Leopard tank, by comparison, lumbers along at a top speed of 65-kilometres per hour and represents, to some, a fatter target. Canada's Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier once described them as a "millstone" that had hamstrung Canadian military thinking for years.

Tanks were slated to be phased out of service as little as a year ago as part of Hillier's "army transformation" in favor of a new Stryker Mobile Gun System that was thought better able to face new asymmetric threats from terrorists, suicide bombers and small well-armed militias.

The Stryker is essentially a LAV III variant armed with a 105-millimetre gun like the Leopard.

What the Leopard offers that the Stryker and LAVs don't is heavy armour that provides crews within superior protection and, unlike the wheeled LAVs, its tracks don't bog down in soft sand or marshy soil.

Moreover, the Leopards' heavy armour will fare better against the insurgents' weapon-of-choice – rocket propelled grenades or even Spandrel missiles – than the LAVs.

Another tactical consideration is that the Taliban seem to have abandoned hit-and-run tactics in favor of more traditional defence of established hardened positions. The Leopards should excel in attacking such static defences.

But, it has yet to be seen how the Leopards' hydraulics and cooling systems withstand the oppressive heat of the Afghan desert or their precision optics the powder-like sandstorms.

In all of this, only one thing appears certain: the army transformation program to replace the Canada's Leopard tanks with Stykers or something else appears well and truly dead, if not for now, for a long time to come.

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