

Heading home

There's no need to rush into another conflict once Canada's Afghanistan mission is done-but we must not neglect our military

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The Harper government continues to give every indication that it means what it has repeatedly said: the Canadian military – its battle group, its trainers in Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams, and its soldiers in the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar – will be out of Afghanistan in 2011. The army has suffered casualties, it has tested its tactics and tried out its equipment in tough conditions. The Canadian Forces last year produced its first training manual on counter-insurgency operations, and there are already bureaucrats and military officers in Ottawa who are looking to Darfur or the Democratic Republic of Congo or other failed and failing states as places to hone the army's edge further. But why?

First, there is no requirement that Canada do anything once the Canadian Forces is out of Afghanistan. We need not fight another war simply to employ the army anymore than we must take on a peacekeeping mission. An army can sit and train and rest and recuperate, and after the endless rotations of infantry battle groups to Kandahar, rest is what the army needs. Let the soldiers decompress and meet their families again.

Second, it would help in determining what the country was to do with its military if it knew what it wanted to do. The Harper government's 'Canada First Defence Strategy' declared that the first task of the Canadian Forces was the defence of Canada. That is the correct priority and there will be challenges aplenty to our sovereignty in the coming years, but what else must the CF do? What role should Canada play in the hemisphere, in Asia, in the world? Does Canada have an obligation to do its share of the global heavy lifting that is often required? What is the foreign policy into which the military must fit?

The reality is that the government, each and every government and not only the Harper government, has no idea what Canadian foreign policy is or should be, beyond the realization, as Eugene Lang and Eric Morse have noted, 'that Canada is incapable militarily, diplomatically, and politically of acting outside a multilateral coalition'. That is certainly true. The first requirement is that the government must know what it wants to do and, every bit as important, what it doesn't want to do. Once that is decided, the Canadian Forces must prepare itself to carry out its tasks, whatever they may be.

And if the government cannot decide? Or leaves matters up to events to determine its course of action (which, after all, is the Canadian way)? Then the military must be flexible and must train for a range of contingencies ranging from benign peacekeeping through peacemaking and peace enforcement to counter-insurgency operations and all-out war. That is pretty much what the Canadian Forces has been doing and likely will continue to do, because that is what professional militaries do. They train to be prepared to do whatever their government orders. They present their hypotheses of future actions to the politicians and, depending on how persuasive they are in making their case, the government buys them equipment and adjusts their personnel numbers. If they get it right, they do well on operations; if they get it wrong, large numbers of Canada's youth may die. Our record of forecasting historically has not been stellar, but happily Canadian soldiers have proved to be able to adapt and improvise and fight well if they are properly led.

The key is professionalism. A professional military is a necessity for Canada if we wish to prevent high casualty tolls and defeats, and nothing that has happened in the decade since the Afghanistan war began has disproved the requirement for professionalism. The nation's soldiers demonstrated their skills in action from Tora Bora to Kabul and to Panjwai. That the Canadian Forces survived the bleak years of the 1990s verged on the miraculous but, thanks to the professionalism of its junior and senior leaders, it did. And in Afghanistan, once the government provided the equipment the soldiers needed to defeat a skilled, tenacious enemy, our battle groups prevailed in action.

As the end of the Afghan operation looms, the leadership of the Canadian Forces and the government must work together to maintain the professionalism of the military. The Canadian practice historically has been to let the military sink into irrelevance once the fight is over. No one should argue that we *must* fight somewhere tomorrow. But no one should believe that we *may* not need to fight somewhere the day after tomorrow. The task of the CF and the government is to ensure that Canada's soldiers can do so—and do well—the next time the need arises.

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