

Harper's new militarism seen as nothing but rhetoric

Analysts say the prime minister is only protecting the Conservative lead and deflecting attention from looming problems

Carl Meyer (feat. Jack Granatstein)

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On July 11, Prime Minister Stephen Harper got himself painted up for war. In a ceremony replete with symbolism and striking First Nations imagery, Mr. Harper adorned a feather headdress and bright war paint to be inducted as honorary chief of the Blood Tribe in Alberta.

The ceremony and subsequent images, splashed across the front pages of newspapers, come as many are pronouncing the prime minister a warrior of another sort—one bent on militarizing Canada.

In the past few weeks, an unusually candid Mr. Harper has appeared in front of podiums and microphones to lay out his vision for the country's foreign policy.

Things started when he declared at a Conservative convention in June that "we know where our interests lie, and who our friends are." He went on to say that in the future, "strength is not an option; it is a vital necessity."

"If, in 50 more years, we wish our descendants to celebrate Canada's 200th anniversary, then we must be all we can be in the world today. Therefore, my friends, our party's great purpose is nothing less than to prepare our nation to shoulder a bigger load, in a world that will require it of us."

The prime minister reiterated those sentiments in an interview earlier this month, where he described Canada as a "courageous warrior" and hearkened back to this country's pre-Cold War military history. The interview came at the same time soldiers began to be encouraged to appear in increased amounts at citizenship ceremonies. Meanwhile, despite major budget cuts, the government plans to push ahead with the multi-billion dollar purchase of F-35 jets, and there are no indications that an end to the air and sea campaign in Libya is on the horizon.

All of this has provoked gallons of ink to be spilled suggesting Mr. Harper is articulating the beginnings of a stark, muscular Harper Doctrine, a militaristic vision of Canada in which this country will be in the vanguard of what the prime minister says are looming ideological conflicts in the near future.

But what's really behind the rhetoric? Defence and foreign affairs analysts reject the notion that Mr. Harper is laying the groundwork for a new "Harper Doctrine" or that the government is engaging in a "new militarism." Instead, they argue that the Prime Minister is participating in traditional politicking.

He is trying to buttress his poll numbers going into the traditional summer doldrums, they say, by throwing some read meat to the Conservative base. And he is attempting to broadcast pro-military messages to distract the public from looming budget deficit cutbacks and a pullout from Afghanistan, both of which are threatening to actually reduce Canada's military presence at home and on the world stage.

They also argue that far from a new doctrine, Canadian military and foreign affairs capabilities are not yet sufficiently robust as to allow the government to put its money where its mouth is.

Avoiding the summer blues

Mr. Harper's recent ruminations have given more insight into how he views Canada's relationship with other countries. For example, on July 5 he told Macleans that "it's not just good enough to say, 'everybody likes us.'" He also laid out his view of what he considers "a dangerous world" and Canada's mission to secure it from disaster, suggesting that "countries are from time to time called upon to do things to deal with those dangers, [and] if you don't have the capacity to act, you are not taken seriously."

Then there has been the spectacle of Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird personally flying to Libyan rebel outpost Benghazi to, among other things, ascribe his handwriting to a Canadian bomb. There was also a leaked operational bulletin inside the Department of Citizenship and Immigration stating that military officials should be given prominent, visible roles at citizenship ceremonies.

All of this has provoked columnists to write about Canada's new "political will and military muscle to back up a new and more militant foreign policy" and of a "new Canadian militarism" where the government "gushes" and "glorifies" the troops for the benefit of "read meat Conservatives."

But look closer, say analysts, and it is all domestic. Canadian governing parties have lost ground in polling over 13 of the last 32 summers, writes Éric Grenier in a July 11 Globe and Mail piece. The Conservatives themselves lost support over the first two summers they governed, in 2006 and 2007. Pundits suggest the government has since embarked on a tradition of introducing moves in the summer to rile up its base; last summer, many pointed to the scrapping of the long-form census and the promise to spend billions on fighter jets as two such moves.

Similarly, Brian Job, director of the Security and Defence Forum at the University of British Columbia, argues Mr. Harper is moving to capture the rhetorical space that he considers was handed to him with the Conservative majority victory on May 2, before that space becomes stale.

"I think that you see with Harper, now that he has a majority, not just with foreign policy, but on the domestic side, that he believes he has a mandate to articulate a conservative—both capital and small-c—vision for his government," said Mr. Job.

In this sense, Mr. Harper's statement that foreign policy has "become almost everything" should be seen on its head; that "everything" includes domestic political calculations as well, argues Danford W. Middlemiss, interim director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at Dalhousie University.

"Politics is the art of the possible, and certainly foreign policy rarely is as paramount a topic as is domestic politics," he said.

Others agree as well. David Bercuson, director of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, argues that Mr. Harper's ultimate objective has always been to replace the Liberal Party with the Conservative Party as Canada's natural governing party, and he has been using foreign policy and defence policy as tools to accomplish this. Mr. Bercuson says the recent foreign policy rhetoric being laid out is an extension of this utilization to accomplish domestic goals.

"I don't think that for Stephen Harper, foreign policy exists in and of itself, out there somewhere in space. I think it's directly tied to what he sees as the interests of the Conservative Party and the continuation of the Conservative government," he said in a June 14 Canadian International Council panel.

Capability gap and 'militarism'

Another reason why experts are skeptical of a new "muscular" foreign policy is that the government does not currently have the capability to carry out many grandiose plans—and will be entering a period of having fewer resources available, not more.

This, they say, explains the "militarism"—a rhetorical way to counterbalance these realities.

First, it's important to note that the military as it stands is still small compared to some of its allies, and so the capability to carry anything out is necessarily limited, says J. L. Granatstein, a senior research fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.

"It's still a tiny military for a G8 country; 65,000 regulars is not very much. Its capabilities are extremely limited," he argued.

He suggested that the Canadian military is only getting undue attention now because other NATO allies are cutting back on their own military resources and Canada is getting kudos from some countries like the US for its contribution to the international intervention in Libya.

At the same time, defence analysts say the military cannot deploy in game-changing amounts until the Army recovers from years of abuse in Kandahar and the Navy gets some new ships. Those same analysts have also been hinting for months that the government's decades-long military wishlist, the Canada First Defence Strategy, is unachievable. They expect the list to be pared down, or the capabilities for some of the equipment reduced, as happened with the long-promised Arctic offshore patrol ships.

"Clearly, the Defence department is on its heels, as far as the coming budget cuts," said Mr. Middlemiss of Dalhousie.

"I would say, and most of my colleagues would agree, that the Canada First Defence Strategy...is not affordable anymore. And I think that's recognized, and apparently we are to stay primed for announcements about how that might be altered by the [Prime Minister's Office] and Cabinet."

Mr. Job argues the government faces a serious dilemma since it is winding down its key symbolic and operational military activity in Afghanistan while trying to sustain attention on large capital spending like the F-35s.

"So you're in a position where you don't have many people in the field fighting. You don't have the opportunity to profile those. At the same time, you're saying that we've got to spend huge amounts of money on fighter aircraft and on naval vessels and probably on re-equipping the Army on everything that's been worn out in Afghanistan" he said

The "militarism," he argues, is really an issue of sustaining attention and profile in the Canadian mind, and in the minds of MPs, of the relevance and the need for the military.

Others like Steve Saideman, Canada Research Chair in International Security and Ethnic Conflict at McGill University, say the symbolism of including more troops in the civilian affairs of the nation, like citizenship ceremonies, is not akin to militarizing society because there is no accompanying crisis in civilian control over the military that might be expected in similar situations in other countries.

What's in a name?

Then there is the question of the word "doctrine" itself. Government doctrines lay out specific circumstances and threaten specific action. For example, US president James Monroe declared in 1823 that interventions in the Western hemisphere would be met with American retaliation, in what would come to be known as the Monroe Doctrine. President Harry Truman stated in 1947 that his government would work to prevent Greece and Turkey from falling behind the Iron Curtain, and, eventually, that US power would oppose Soviet expansion around the world; that is now called the Truman Doctrine.

But while the Harper government has taken the position that Canadian contributions to major operations by this country's most important allies are a foregone conclusion, and that the government will work to oppose enemies in the world, experts say that does not go far enough to lay out a doctrine.

For example, while Mr. Harper's statement that Canada has friends and enemies is in some ways fairly black and white, says Mr. Job, "there's no particular detail as to what that means, and to whether or how it extends beyond the border for US operations with allies."

Mr. Middlemiss says while the government has taken what he considers a marginally more consistent approach in laying out its foreign policy principles, such as on the question of support for Israel, the rhetoric is still vague enough to avoid "walking the walk."

And Denis Stairs, professor emeritus in political science at Dalhousie University, Mr. Granatstein, and Mr. Bercuson all argued in the CIC panel that Mr. Harper is not articulating a "doctrine."

"I disagree pretty strongly with the idea that there is a Harper Doctrine, and the reason I disagree is because I take the word 'doctrine' at face value, which is that there's a set of rules and regulations that are going to govern basically operations and tactics of organizations, both military and civil," said Mr. Bercuson.