Canada and NATO: A Military Assessment

Elinor Sloan | May 2012

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elinor Sloan is Associate Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University, Ottawa, and is a former defence analyst with Canada's Department of National Defence. She is a graduate of the Royal Military College of Canada (BA), the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton (MA), and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (PhD).

Dr. Sloan's research interests include: the defence policies and military capabilities of Canada, the United States, major NATO allies, Australia and China; homeland security and defence, NORAD, space and ballistic missile defence, and the Arctic; and, contemporary strategic thought.

Her books include *The Revolution in Military Affairs* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); *Security and Defence in the Terrorist Era* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005 & 2010); *Military Transformation and Modern Warfare* (Praeger Publishers, 2008); and *Modern Military Strategy* (Routledge, 2012).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper looks at NATO's ability to conduct out of area crisis management operations. It focuses specifically on Canada in Kandahar in the period 2006–2011, recognizing any firm conclusions require additional cases. It brings to light the manner in which the Canadian experience changed over time as our troops moved from being under US command, to under NATO command with a distracted America, to under NATO command with an engaged US core. The paper then assesses five layers of relationships Canada has in the security/defence arena. It concludes that all layers are important to Canada in different ways, and the ideal is to fight with our "four eyes" partners. But the bottom line, as drawn out clearly in this case, is strong US leadership: Canada should say "yes" to operations preponderantly led by the United States.

The Pentagon's 2012 strategic guidance calls for high technology and small footprint approaches to maintaining global leadership. Canada must ensure from the outset that any future NATO non-Article V operation it participates in, enjoys core US support and direction. When America leads it will still need dependable and capable allies to contribute a robust combat capability. Canada and others must decide how to respond to this opportunity.

SOMMAIRE

Cette étude examine la capacité de l'OTAN de mener des opérations de gestion de crises hors région. Elle se penche particulièrement sur le Canada à Kandahar dans la période de 2006 à 2011, en reconnaissant que toute conclusion ferme nécessite des cas supplémentaires. Elle fait ressortir la manière dont l'expérience canadienne a changé dans le temps, à mesure que nos troupes sont passées d'un commandement étatsunien, à un commandement de l'OTAN avec une Amérique non engagée, à un commandement de l'OTAN avec engagement du corps étatsunien. L'étude évalue ensuite cinq niveaux de relations que le Canada entretient dans l'aire de la sécurité et de la défense. Il conclut que tous les niveaux sont, de façons différentes, importants pour le Canada et que l'idéal est de combattre avec nos partenaires « à quatre yeux ». Mais , le compte final, comme on conclut clairement dans ce cas, c'est un leadership américain fort. Le Canada devrait dire « oui » aux opérations dirigées en prépondérance par les États-Unis.

L'orientation stratégique de 2012 du Pentagone fait appel à des approches à haute technologie et à empreintes réduites pour maintenir un leadership mondial. Le Canada doit s'assurer d'entrée de jeu que toute opération future ne relevant pas de l'article 5, de l'OTAN, à laquelle il participera, jouisse d'un soutien et d'une direction de base de la part des U.S.A. Quand les États-Unis mènent ils auront encore besoin d'alliés fiables et capables de contribuer une robuste capacité de combat. Le Canada et d'autres doivent décider comment répondre à cette occasion.

At the NATO Summit in Lisbon in November 2010, Alliance Heads of State and Government released their first post-9/11 Strategic Concept. *Active Engagement, Modern Defence* identifies three essential core tasks of the Alliance meant to contribute to safeguarding the security of its members: collective defence of Alliance territory in accordance with Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty; *crisis management* of conflicts that impact, or have the potential to impact Alliance security; and *cooperative security,* or actively engaging with other countries and international organizations to enhance international security. Unstated in this list of core tasks, but included in the Concept's subsequent paragraphs, is that NATO is an essential transatlantic forum for consultation among its members.

Few would dispute the political value of a relatively small group of nations meeting on a regular basis at various levels to discuss security and defence issues of common interest. The idea of looking outward to actively engage with other countries and international organizations, too, can only be seen as helpful in broader security terms. As well, although not yet tested, we can surmise that NATO's collective defence mission is one at which it would excel. (The Alliance's one and only invocation of Article V, stated in principle on September 12, 2001 and confirmed a few weeks later, was not followed by an Article V NATO combat operation.) But what about the Alliance's other core task of crisis management? What can we say about NATO's ability to conduct out of area operations to address circumstances that do not directly threaten the territorial integrity of its members but are nevertheless deemed by at least some NATO countries to impact their security?

This paper looks at NATO's ability to conduct out of area crisis management operations. The topic is vast not only because NATO now comprises 28 countries, each of which will have its own view, but also because there are, unfortunately, already many case studies to draw on. They include Afghanistan and Libya in the post-9/11 period, and also Kosovo and Bosnia in the 1990s. The discussion below focuses on Canada's experience in Afghanistan in the period 2006–2011, and assesses what this particular mission reveals about when and whether Canada should contribute military forces to future NATO operations. Any firm conclusions about NATO's out of area capability would require a broader study involving additional countries and cases. This is the picture from a Canadian perspective with regard to one operation.

The early years: NATO in Afghanistan 2003–2005

To understand the NATO experience in Afghanistan, one has to understand the preoccupations of its biggest and most powerful member, the United States, in the decade following 9/11. Soon after the attacks the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), an almost entirely US operation that included special operations forces from a few select allies, including Canada. Within months, OEF toppled the Taliban regime, creating the opportunity for an international mission to consolidate gains. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established under UN auspices at the end of 2001—under rotating lead nations—with the mission of carrying out stabilization and reconstruction activities in and around Kabul. OEF continued operating throughout the country under the command of US Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A), a three-star American headquarters initially located at Bagram air base outside Kabul, and then in Kabul itself. This CFC-A Headquarters conducted counterinsurgency operations in the more volatile southern and eastern areas of the country, and coordinated intelligence, special operations, and civil aid to the rest of the country.

ISAF's difficulty in securing a new lead nation every six months led directly to NATO taking over command in summer 2003. At the time, both the UN and the Afghan Transitional Authority (ATA) Chairman (now President) Hamid Karzai recommended an expansion of ISAF beyond the Kabul area to cover the entire country. However, at the time, an Alliance that had reluctantly been led by its then Secretary General, Lord Robertson, into a Chapter 7 peace enforcement operation well 'out-of-area', was in no mood for expansion. America also disagreed on the basis that not enough troops would be available to stabilize Kabul and the areas under the regional commands. Coincidentally, however, the short-lived US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom had come and gone, to be replaced with a much more resource-intensive counterinsurgency mission in that country. As Iraq became the

main US geo-strategic effort, OEF became an economy of force mission, focused on limited counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency operations and the establishment of the first Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—a mix of some 250 civilian and military personnel engaged in security and reconstruction activities. These were set up in the north, southeast and central regions as a means of promoting stabilization by extending the reach of the Government of Afghanistan.

With the US increasingly focused on Iraq, it encouraged in ever-stronger terms that NATO expand its ISAF footprint in Afghanistan. In December 2003, the North Atlantic Council authorized the Supreme Allied Commander, General James Jones, to initiate the expansion of ISAF by taking over command of the German-led PRT in Kunduz. Six months later the Alliance announced that it would establish provincial reconstruction teams at various additional spots in northern Afghanistan. The process was completed in October 2004, marking the end of the first phase of ISAF's expansion with the creation of Regional Command North (RC North). Subsequent United Nations Security Council Resolutions mandated further expansion to the West in September 2005 (RC West); to the South at the end of July 2006 (RC South); and finally to the East in October 2006 (RC East), by which time all previously OEF-owned PRTs in the East were shifted to ISAF command.

Mandate expansion: NATO in RC South, 2006

Of course there was much more going on in the south than the work of the PRTs. OEF continued to conduct extensive counterinsurgency operations but, preoccupied with Iraq, it was the US desire that some of this counterinsurgency activity in Afghanistan also be undertaken by other nations. Canada stepped up to the plate and agreed to take the lead in the south, committing a brigade headquarters and an infantry battle group, and assuming responsibility for the PRT in Kandahar. Canadian Brigadier General David Fraser assumed command of the first Task Force, which saw the subsequent deployment of significant British and Dutch contingents, as well as smaller forces from Australia, Denmark, Romania, Estonia and the United States. The idea was to establish the brigade under OEF, and then switch it to ISAF command after some months, as a means of 'easing in' the change of command. Canada, noted one embedded reporter, "was seen by both NATO and the Americans as the logical 'transition team': they were trusted by both the U.S. and by NATO nations such as France and Germany, who had become increasingly estranged from Washington over the Iraq War."[1]

Among the major contingents, Canada chose to assume responsibility for the volatile Kandahar Province, Britain for the equally restive Helmand province, and the Dutch for the somewhat more peaceful province of Uruzgan. Canada arrived first, in early 2006, moving most of its troops south from Kabul where it had operated for more than two years as a part of ISAF, while the British and Dutch arrived later in the spring. Task Force Orion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ian Hope (reporting to Fraser), was tasked with setting the conditions for the transition of the south from OEF to ISAF command, including paving the way for the arrival of British and Dutch troops.

The multinational brigade reported to OEF for about five months, before shifting to ISAF command on July 31, 2006, when NATO took over RC South. At the time of the change of command almost all of the some 18,000 US troops in OEF, mostly in RC East, remained under US command. However, some of the smaller US non-combat support elements were transferred to NATO command. Three months later, much of OEF did transfer to ISAF command, but this transfer was at first more on paper than in reality. All US forces in Afghanistan continued to report ultimately to CFC-A in Kabul, which was under the command of the Commander US Central Command in Tampa Florida. Tellingly, not until February 2007 did US forces assigned to ISAF actually put ISAF patches on their uniforms, when US General Dan McNeill assumed command of ISAF.[2]

1 Chris Wattie, *Contact Charlie: The Canadian Army, the Taliban, and the Battle for Afghanistan* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2008), 51–52.
2 Author telecon with Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope, 16 December 2011.

Before and after the RC South change of command

The fact and timing of the change in command in RC South had a significant impact on Canada's early experience in Kandahar. US Special Forces had warned Task Force Orion that it was "going to be a hot summer," and indeed the whole period of spring to fall 2006 ended up being far from peaceful.[3] An early indicator of things to come was the car bomb that killed Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry in January 2006. Over the next several months it became clear that the Taliban were building up forces in the area around Kandahar City. When Task Force Orion arrived in southern Afghanistan in January 2006, there were 200 Taliban scattered across Kandahar province; by May there was double this in the tiny Panjwayi District alone.[4] Charged with the general mission of disrupting Taliban activity, the task force adopted a strategy of sending platoon sized patrols to area villages to detect such activity and, if found, to follow up by cordoning off and surrounding the area with a larger infantry force and sweeping it clear of Taliban.

The growing Taliban—at first not fully acknowledged by OEF because of the US desire that nothing disrupt its handoff to NATO that summer—meant that Canadian troops fought numerous skirmishes, and in some cases all-out battles, in the late spring and early summer of 2006. During this period US support to Task Force Orion and the multinational brigade, which still reported to OEF, was significant. "The Americans always arrived when the Canadians were in trouble," Hope recalls, "there was one radio network and all of RC South was on the same satellite based net…when there was a call for support everyone could hear it.[5] " Within minutes of a call US air support would arrive en masse, including, depending on the requirement: Predator unmanned aerial vehicles for surveillance information, Predators armed with precision munitions for close air support, Apache attack helicopters, fighter aircraft or, on several occasions, a B1 bomber, and, Black Hawk helicopters for medical evacuation. With some 80 helicopters in RC South, OEF was readily able to respond to Canadian requests for assistance—as long as they were part of the OEF chain of command. American Army intelligence, as well as psychological and special operations support were also available to Task Force Orion.

Such support, in the words of the commander of Task Force Orion, "died the moment NATO took over."[6] Not until 2009 would Canadians in Kandahar once again enjoy this level of backing. The operational impact of the change of command was felt almost immediately by Canadian troops on the ground. In the middle of a battle to clear a large number of Taliban occupying an abandoned school, Hope's troops called in air support. Rather than receiving immediate low flying assistance from US Apaches, as had been the case in the past, they were supported by Dutch Apaches that, because of national caveats, were barred from flying below a certain altitude. In addition, the Apaches refused Hope's order to engage the Taliban around the school.[7] The Brigade Tactical Operations Centre at Kandahar airfield also ruled out the Task Force's desperate requests for the use of artillery fire on Taliban positions,[8] because the requests did not comply with the new rules of engagement that were brought in when NATO took command.

Medusa and caveats

The sudden new circumstances within which Canada found itself became even more apparent as Canada prepared for what was billed by the commander of ISAF, and indeed the NATO Secretary General, as NATO's "main, main fight" of the season: Operation Medusa.[9] Conducted by Task Force 3-06, which replaced Task Force Orion in mid-August, the operation was commanded by Brigadier General Fraser. It involved the Canadian Task Force

3 Author interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope, Ottawa, 8 November 2011.
4 Wattie, 85.
5 Author interview with Hope.
6 ibid.
7 ibid.
8 Wattie, 265.
9 British Lieutenant General David Richards, as quoted in Bernd Horn, *No Lack of Courage: Operation Medusa, Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), 35, 44.

under Lieutenant Colonel Omer Lavoie, a British combat support element, a Dutch support element, and US special operations troops. Over the course of about three weeks in September 2006, the combat forces engaged in what turned out to be a conventionally dug in army of Taliban in the Panjwayi district, ultimately succeeding in clearing the area of Taliban forces.

General Fraser began plans for the operation in August, crafting a four-phase operation that was coherent except for one key component: sufficiently large combat forces. The British were engaged in combat in Helmand province and thus were unable to contribute forces. The Dutch declined to participate in the actual combat, but did take over responsibility for a forward operating base, thus freeing up more Canadian troops for combat.[10] Unofficially, the United States provided Canada with significant forces and enablers.[11] That said, America was intent that other NATO countries step up to the plate: the key reason US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had sought to increase NATO's involvement in Afghanistan over the previous three years was to lessen the burden on US troops.[12]

But military caveats placed by national governments on their contingents in Afghanistan meant that other NATO countries were unwilling, or unable, to step up to the plate. Caveats, or restrictions on the employment of forces, are common in multinational operations. Canada placed caveats on its forces when they were in Bosnia in the 1990s and its forces also operated under caveats in Afghanistan until they moved south in early 2006, at which time its caveats were removed. Tactical caveats involved restrictions on how or when NATO commanders might deploy the troops. Some contingents were not allowed to operate at night, use tear gas to disperse crowds, fight after a snowfall, conduct the helicopter transport of Afghan National Army forces, carry out tactical decisions without first consulting their national capital, and/or engage in combat operations unless in strict self-defence. Geographic caveats involved restrictions on where troops could be deployed. Italy, Spain, and Germany, for example, had large contingents in the relatively safe Northern and Western areas of Afghanistan but would not permit their troops to be deployed in the more dangerous southern and eastern areas of the country (in Germany's case for constitutional reasons).

Caveats limit the military utility of deployed forces because rather than having maximum flexibility to draft plans, commanders must shape the conduct of the mission to fit the caveats on the available forces. Thus it is inevitable that caveats will have an impact on activities at the operational level. A 2008 report of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly identified more than three-dozen caveats in place that were having a negative impact on actual ISAF military operations.[13] This was down from the 102 that were identified by General Jones in 2006 as hobbling ISAF's commanders.[14] The upshot was that as Fraser drew up plans for, and carried out, Op Medusa, he had only a relatively small number of combat troops with which to work, and many of the troops he did have were operating with restrictions. "The national caveats in NATO are killing me, they are really killing me," Fraser lamented a month after the battle, "most NATO countries came out with national caveats that precluded them from assisting us in actual fighting in [southern Afghanistan]."[15]

After Medusa: NATO in Southern Afghanistan 2007–2008

Op Medusa was successful in its immediate goals of disrupting Taliban forces and conducting operations to clear the enemy out of the Panjwayi district, a region not far from Kandahar City. But long-term success—phases three and four of the operation's plan—called for creating a secure zone to pave the way for stabilization and reconstruction operations that would enable the population to return. This task, even more so than the actual combat operation, required additional forces to operate in the more dangerous southern regions of the country.

10 Horn, 38–39, 45.
11 Email from Major General (retired) David Fraser to author, 13 February 2012.
12 Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 689.
13 James Sperling and Mark Webber, "NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009), 509.
14 Leo Michel and Robert E. Hunter, "Keeping Our Allies on Our Side in Afghanistan," *Los Angeles Times,* 27 October 2009.
15 As quoted in Horn, 46.

In September 2006, and again at the NATO Summit two months later, the United States, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands pressed other countries to send some of their forces south to help combat Taliban activity and consolidate gains. These requests, repeated at subsequent meetings such as during the fall 2007 Defence Ministerial and the April 2008 Summit, were consistently rejected. Germany, Italy and Spain agreed only that they would venture into danger 'hot spots' in the case of an emergency, a vague and essentially meaningless commitment that was first voiced in 2006 and maintained thereafter.

For Canada, Allied refusals to send forces and equipment south had at least two notable negative impacts during this period. The first issue centred on helicopters. In the months after Operation Medusa Canadian troops continued in their mission of establishing security in Kandahar Province, a task that involved the forward deployment of infantry and the resupply of these forces. Britain and the United States did almost all of their resupply work and much of their troop transport with heavy lift Chinook helicopters so that their forces were not exposed to Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) planted along the roads. But Canada did not have its own troop lift helicopters, a key equipment shortfall that dated back to the 1990s when it sold its Cold War era Chinooks to the Dutch as a cost-saving measure. Thus, commanders varied the routes that their troops travelled in order to mitigate risks to soldiers in Afghanistan. Canada also bought and deployed Nyala armoured vehicles which, designed with V-shaped hulls, were somewhat more likely to withstand an IED blast than a Light Armoured Vehicle. Nonetheless, from the summer of 2006 onward it was clear that Canadian troops were at a much higher risk of injury and death than those of our allies because of the lack of transport helicopters.

Supply chain bottlenecks meant that Canada could not quickly remedy the situation through acquisitions. With British, Dutch and US helicopters stretched to support even their own troops, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer appealed to other NATO allies for military transport helicopters. But France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey were all reported to have turned down requests to redeploy existing aircraft in theatre to the south where the need was greatest, and/or to send appropriate helicopters that were available in their home countries.[16] NATO was forced into a short term fix of chartering civilian aircraft to conduct routine supply so as to free up British, Dutch and US helicopters to transport troops and maintain the more dangerous supply lines.

A second impact involved consolidating gains. Effective counterinsurgency doctrine called for areas to be cleared of Taliban insurgents and then for a NATO presence to remain to ensure the insurgents did not return—a basic "ink-blot" strategy of slowly spreading stability outward. Yet with insufficient troops, this was not possible. Even if the initial "rooting out" could be accomplished, gains could not be consolidated. It was in large part because of the insufficient number of forces available from NATO members that insurgents were able to regain ground.[17] "With the Taliban resurgence," former Canadian Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier later argued, "we didn't have the troops on the ground to do the job the way it had to be done."[18]

These two factors figured centrally in the report produced by the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, led by former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley. Established in October 2007 to provide the government advice on whether Canada should commit to ISAF past 2009, the Manley Commission recommended in its January 2008 report that Canada's continued involvement be contingent on securing, by early 2009: the assignment of an additional battle group to Kandahar province of about 1,000 troops by a NATO or non-NATO ISAF Troop Contributing Nation; heavy lift helicopters for troop transport; and, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR).[19]

16 Paul Koring, "Beleaguered NATO Set to Charter Helicopters," *Globe and Mail,* 24 October 2007; Omar El Akkad, "Hillier Calls for Allies to Share Load in Afghanistan," *Globe and Mail,* 25 October 2007.
17 *Report of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan* (Ottawa, 2008), 26.
18 Rick Hillier, *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010), 475.
19 *Report of the Independent Panel,* 38.

All three factors were ultimately met, paving the way for a mandate extension. For the UAV requirement, the government leased a half dozen Israeli built Heron medium altitude UAVs from a Canadian firm. The other two aspects involved the United States. Canada was able to buy a half dozen second-hand Chinook helicopters from the US Army, and their acquisition did much to alleviate Canada's vulnerability in this area. Critically, it was also the United States that met Canada's requirement for additional troop support. In an early 2008 letter to the German defence minister, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reportedly demanded Germany send an additional 1,000 troops to the restive south.[20] There was also some indication during this period that France might consider sending a contingent of troops to RC South. But Germany declined and France chose instead to send 700 soldiers to RC East. The French commitment did, however, enable the United States to redeploy the necessary forces to RC South, thereby fulfilling the Manley report's recommendation.

America changes tack

In fact, as reported at the time, and well before the Manley Commission issued its report, the United States had given private assurances that it would answer Canada's call if no other country came forward.[21] This was part of a change in approach to Afghanistan on the part of the Bush administration that dated back over a year, coinciding with the November 2006 resignation of Rumsfeld from the Office of Secretary of Defense, and prompted by the resurgence in Taliban activity. In the late summer and fall of 2006, Canada's Deputy Military Representative to the NATO Military Committee at the time, Brigadier General Serge Labbé recounts that "every time Canada said it needed more troops it got blank stares. Then, one day, a few weeks after Rumsfeld's resignation and Jones' subsequent departure as SACEUR, [American Ambassador to NATO] Victoria Nuland announced at a meeting of the North Atlantic Council that the United States wanted to put the issue of more troops on the table."[22] This represented a complete reversal of the US position under the new Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates.

It was the beginning of a change in the US approach and priority accorded to Afghanistan that, as mentioned above, is key to understanding the NATO (and Canadian) experience in that war torn country. Following a White House review of US policy in Afghanistan that was completed in early 2007, America's troop strength began a slow upward trend under the Bush administration. At first, this was through the addition of 3,500 US Army soldiers in spring 2007, then the deployment of 3,200 US Marines in spring 2008, and finally a decision in fall 2008 that led to the US deploying an additional 20,000 soldiers to Afghanistan in 2009.

These trends continued and accelerated after Obama came into office in January 2009. Not only had the new president campaigned on the importance of the Afghan mission but by this time the "surge" of US forces in Iraq, carried out under the command of General David Petraeus from early 2007 onward, had achieved real results. The improving situation in Iraq was enabling a drawdown of US forces, freeing them up for other potential missions. Yet the new president, who approved the additional 20,000 troops in spring 2009, questioned whether "piling on more and more troops" was the correct approach in Afghanistan.[23] It was a report by US Army General Stanley McChrystal, who took command of both US (OEF) and NATO (ISAF) forces in Afghanistan in summer 2009, which proved to be the decisive factor. After leading a thorough assessment of the war effort, McChrystal concluded the situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating in the face of a resilient insurgency. The requirement was for tens of thousands of additional troops to implement a refocused counterinsurgency campaign that involved targeting terrorist networks, stabilizing urban areas, and training domestic security forces. After some debate within the administration, in late 2009, Obama authorized an additional US troop deployment of 30,000 soldiers, raising America's total troop strength in Afghanistan to 100,000 by summer 2010.

20 Laura J. Winter, "Afghanistan Strains NATO Ties," *Christian Science Monitor,* 6 February 2008.
21 Matthew Fisher, "Political 'Hot Potatoes' on NATO Agenda," *Ottawa Citizen,* 31 March 2008.
22 Author interview with Brigadier General (retired) Serge Labbé, Kingston, 29 November 2011.
23 As quoted in Rajiv Chandraseharan, "In Afghanistan, U.S. May Shift Strategy," *Washington Post,* 31 July 2009.

NATO in Afghanistan 2009–2011

It is difficult to overstate the operational impact on ISAF of receiving core US strategic leadership in 2009. "We need to enter into any crisis with a conceptual framework that demonstrates unity of thought, unity of purpose, and unity of action," Lieutenant General Stuart Beare, who was Deputy Commander of Police for the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan in 2010–11, has argued. McChrystal's perspective was that we "change or fail… Not until the McChrystal plan did we have unity of thought, and the Alliance was able to reorient around that vision."[24] Major General Jon Vance, commander of Task Force Kandahar in 2009 and again in 2010, has similarly drawn attention to the importance of the McChrystal report and placed it in the context of the evolution in Canadian thinking about the mission in Afghanistan. "Canada resisted the view that this was a counterinsurgency operation. We knew early on, from about 2007," but Canada and the Alliance in general, particularly Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum to which ISAF reports, "shied away from the truth of the conflict at first." "The Manley report forced us to think about it," in terms of needing concrete troop commitments, but "not until Obama and the McChrystal report" did things truly change. The impact was powerful: "whereas the Manley report asked for one battalion the United States sent twelve."[25]

The McChrystal approach established another important element of any effective military operation: unity of command. As Brigadier General Denis Thompson, commander of Joint Task Force Kandahar in 2008 recounts, having two military commands in Afghanistan (OEF and ISAF) with two separate staffs created coordination problems, not least of which was the increased potential for collateral damage to the civilian population. Because OEF was not integrated into the NATO command, the only way Task Force Kandahar could coordinate activity was geographically, such as during the June 2008 prison breakout when each command was assigned responsibility for a separate half of Kandahar City. Although OEF usually operated at the Eastern fringe of Kandahar province, there were frequent requirements to de-conflict operations.[26] McChrystal resolved this problem by creating a dual-hatted commander position, a four star US general who is both commander of US Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and commander of ISAF (COMISAF). Only a small number of forces in the country remain outside the COMISAF chain, notably selected special operations forces reporting to USFOR-A. It was an approach that General David Petraeus, replacing McChrystal in 2010, maintained, as has the current commander.

At the tactical level the increased US commitment to Afghanistan had a significant impact on Canadian operations. Against the stretched resources experienced by Canadian troops in 2006 and 2007, stood US Marine Corps operations in Helmand province in spring/summer 2008 that helped to ease the ongoing pressure on Canadian troops in neighbouring Kandahar.[27] Whereas Thompson's Task Force Kandahar (2008–09) was the only brigade in the province, Brigadier General Dean Milner's (2010–11) shared Kandahar with three and a half US brigades, which enabled the Canadian area of operations to become progressively smaller. In contrast to the challenges Canadian troops experienced early on with respect to allied caveats and heavy lift helicopters, Vance found that "German and Italian caveats had no bearing on us," and that the task forces he commanded "had no problem at all with air support."[28] Similarly, the experience of one of the last Canadian commanders of Joint Task Force Kandahar before Canada switched to a training role in summer 2011 was that NATO "worked well" and "while there were some restrictions on troops, this did not present a big problem."[29]

The clincher is the content of the generalized reference to "NATO" when we talk about a "NATO operation." The discussion above reveals that when an operation includes a large US combat element then Canada's experience is, relatively, a much better one than when the operation is not built on a strongly engaged US core. This is because NATO as an organization does not have many of its own assets. It has an integrated military command structure that brings together the forces placed by member countries at Alliance disposal. However,

24 Author interview with Lieutenant General Stuart Beare, Commander of Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command, Ottawa, 6 December 2011.
25 Author interview with Major General Jon Vance, Director of Staff, Strategic Joint Staff, Ottawa, 6 December 2011.
26 Author interview with Brigadier General Denis Thompson, Commander of Canadian Special Operations Command, Ottawa, 30 November 2011.
27 Murray Brewster, "U.S. Offensive Taking Pressure Off Canadians in Kandahar," *Canadian Press,* 1 June 2008.
28 Author interview with Vance.
29 Seminar presentation in Ottawa, Fall 2011, under Chatham House (non attributable) rules.

when it comes to any particular mission, countries must still agree that these forces can be deployed to theatre. In the final analysis, they are still national assets. "The biggest challenge in Afghanistan," Fraser stated in the wake of Medusa, "is that NATO in itself has virtually none, or very little, of the combat enablers…The enablers are for the most part still owned by their contributing countries, and here in Afghanistan largely the enablers we are looking at are aviation, air and ISR, and they are still American or British."[30]

Layers of relationships

What this means for Canada and our participation in future NATO missions can be better understood in the context of five different layers of relationships that we have in the security and defence arena. At the very centre, our first and most important relationship is the bilateral one with the United States. This circumstance is not unique to Canada; the bilateral US-Australia relationship is, for example, key for Australia and provides a large part of the explanation for its Afghanistan contribution. The next layer comprises our "four eyes" partners, sometimes shortened as ABCA, meaning America, Britain, Canada and Australia, and sometimes expanded to "five eyes" to take in New Zealand. The third involves those allies "who are willing to play hardball," such as the Dutch, the Danes and sometimes the French,[31] while the fourth layer takes in countries that make a small but tangible contribution to military operations. Newer NATO members from central and eastern Europe and the Baltic region, such as Romania, Poland and Estonia, and even non-NATO countries like Mongolia, sent soldiers to RC South either as part of the combat operation or to do things like guard the Kandahar Airfield, thereby freeing up Canadian soldiers to fight. Finally, the fifth and outermost layer comprises what are sometimes referred to as "non-swimmers," that is, countries that are NATO allies but are unwilling or unable to make a significant combat contribution to an out of area mission.

The non-swimmers are important for NATO operations because of the intangible, but critical, component of legitimacy. Major General David Neasmith, who worked in the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan in 2010–11 commanding the effort to develop the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Ministry of Defence, points out there can be a certain stigma involved when one speaks of a US-only operation. "NATO brings legitimacy both for the United States and for the Afghans. Legitimacy is worth the existence of a club, and [the club] has to have international recognition—we can't just label everything 'coalition of the willing.'"[32] More broadly, notes Labbé, legitimacy is guaranteed because the NATO ISAF mission has been mandated by the UN and is renewed every year by the UN Security Council. Beyond this, the United States "cannot do everything on its own"; allies can provide very important contributions, even if these are not in a combat role.[33] For Vance, "The value of having non-swimmers is that you can add to the number of flags" involved, thereby adding to legitimacy and covering off secondary but necessary jobs.[34]

Closer in, with regards to the fourth layer of defence relationships, the NATO name also comes into play because the legitimacy that the organization conveys makes it easier to attract these participants. A notable aspect of ISAF is that while it is a NATO operation, almost half of those involved are non-NATO countries. Legitimacy makes this possible. "If an Alliance is seen as credible," points out Beare, who had a Chilean infantry company under his command in NATO's Bosnia operation a decade ago, "[non-NATO countries] don't question the mission, they just fit in. There is no other military organization in the world that can do this…Without NATO the international community could not have rallied in Afghanistan."

30 As quoted in Horn, 45.
31 Author Interview with Major General David Neasmith, Chief of Staff, Assistant Deputy Minister Information Management, Ottawa, 18 November 2011.
32 ibid.
33 ibid.
34 Author interview with Vance.

Under the multinational surface, however, the practical mechanism by which these contributions are actually made is through bilateral agreements with the United States. If a non-NATO (or even NATO) country wants to be involved and contribute military forces to ISAF but is unable to get its forces to theatre and/or sustain these forces logistically for more than a short period of time—which means the vast majority of countries in the world—then America is almost certainly involved. Typically a bilateral arrangement is made whereby the United States conducts the strategic lift of these forces and agrees to sustain them while they are in Afghanistan.[35]

Moving down to the third layer of Canada's security and defence relationships, NATO is important here because it acts as an effective mechanism for standardization and interoperability. For decades the original NATO members have conducted exercises together and have standardized their doctrine, equipment and technical procedures through the use of Standardized Agreements or STANAGS, of which there are well over a thousand. Agreed in Brussels and implemented by national militaries, STANAGS facilitate the conduct of a multinational operation. "The benefit of having an Alliance," notes Thompson, "is the standardization of everything from staff and operation order procedures to training, map symbols, bullets and fuel…When you conduct an operation we all talk the same language…The military value of NATO is that you don't have to rediscover these things every time."

STANAGS are implemented across all layers, including by longstanding NATO members that have opted out of combat roles, by new NATO countries that are still seeking to modernize their militaries to NATO standards, and even by aspiring NATO countries, through the Alliance's Partnership for Peace Programme. But where they truly have their military benefit is with respect to a coalition building exercise that reaches its practical outer limit at the third layer of defence relationships. Explains Vance: "While we may label something a NATO operation," this is not literally the case. "The only place where all NATO countries come together is in the North Atlantic Council," and not on the battlefield. What starts at NATO Headquarters quickly becomes a coalition building exercise centred on "who is going to play" and the "degree of US involvement…We are always in a pre-crisis or crisis stage…the value of pre-made alliances is that it makes the coalition building process work better."[36]

Canada's second layer of defence relationships, ABCA, comprises the core group of countries with which we are most likely to fight in the future. This conclusion is supported by Canada's experience in Afghanistan, which involved close operations with the United States and Britain throughout, and included a key Australian presence. The Dutch were also in theatre, however, in a region where it was necessary to mix "aggressive, relentless" targeting of insurgents[37] with governance and winning over the population, they leaned toward the latter, and chose to not always take part in combat operations. The interesting wild card is France. Having left NATO's integrated military structure in 1966 under Charles de Gaulle, France rejoined it in 2009 under the Presidency of Nicholas Sarkozy. The return marked a change in French participation in the Afghan mission. France deployed combat forces to northern Afghanistan in November 2001 and SOF in the South in 2003 as part of OEF. But in fall 2007, it enhanced its combat role by relocating its fighter aircraft from a base in Tajikistan to the heart of the war zone, Kandahar airfield, increasing the effectiveness with which it could provide Canadian troops with close air support, and in 2008 it deployed the ground force noted above to RC East. Although not covered in this study, Canada's more recent experience in the NATO operation in Libya probably further supports the likelihood of France being a country with which Canada will fight in the future.

Apart from a possible growing relationship with France, nothing much has changed since the early days of the Cold War in Canada's second layer of defence relations. America, Britain and Canada first formalized efforts to standardize their militaries for expeditionary operations back in 1947 through the ABC Armies Program, adding Australia in 1963 to make ABCA. Although New Zealand formally joined the program in 2006, after years of observer status, the ABCA moniker has been retained. Because Australia is not part of

35 Author interview with Beare.
36 Author interview with Vance.
37 One of the last Canadian commanders of Joint Task Force Kandahar, seminar presentation in Ottawa, Fall 2011, under Chatham House rules.

NATO, over the years ABCA countries have negotiated another set of standardization agreements, Quadripartite Standardization Agreements or QSTAGS, which essentially follow NATO standards. For Canada, the four eyes (sometime three eyes, sometimes five eyes) organizing principle is central not only to military standardization and interoperability but also, indeed critically, for intelligence sharing, a further relationship at this level that dates back to World War Two.

Notwithstanding the value of this second layer of defence relationships, the experience in Afghanistan most clearly highlighted the importance to Canada, during military operations, of its bilateral ties with the United States. A 2010 snapshot of a sea of US trucks and armored vehicles lined up in a compound outside Kabul is an overwhelming reminder of the degree to which this "NATO" operation depended on the United States' active involvement. Notes Neasmith, "The vast majority of theatre support and logistics was done by the US, the command structure was dominated by the US, the facilities, the trucks…the sustainment of the ANA, the resources for building the force…the lion's share was provided and paid for by the US."[38] All of the fourth layer participations, and no doubt many of the third, were made possible by the United States. A key second layer participant, Australia, was there because of America. And Canada's own experience in Afghanistan, the highs and lows at the tactical level, in the final analysis reflected and depended on the commitment and support of the United States.

Image: A NATO Operation?

38 Author interview with Neasmith.

Conclusion

Canada's first question when considering a commitment to a future NATO operation, argues General Labbé, must be "Who can we rely on to help us?" Caveats, he notes, are a "reality going in, driven by domestic politics"; the argument is not that there should be no caveats, but rather that they should be known in advance and accounted for in our decision making. Generals Beare and Vance concur that, in essence, there is "no point in going on about caveats." Rather, the requirement is a wide-eyed assessment of Canada's role and level of participation based on the commitments that countries have or have not made. "Even article V offers each nation independent action. The discretionary space now translates to out of area [operations]."[39]

While these are all valid points, the Afghanistan case illustrates that when it comes to NATO crisis management missions—non-article V, out of area operations—we do not have to search far to find answers on when and whether to participate. For Lieutenant-Colonel Hope, who experienced first-hand working within the Alliance at the tactical level, Canada should only take part in NATO out of area combat operations if they are supported by US assets. "Canada can fight, as long as the US is there to fill the gaps."[40] In the personal opinion of Major General Neasmith, who worked at the operational/strategic level within ISAF, the ideal is that there be four eyes involvement, but the bottom line is core American participation. Canada should say "yes" to NATO operations "preponderantly led by the United States."

These conclusions hold important implications for Canada when one considers the strategic guidance for the US Department of Defense released by the Pentagon in January 2012. The new strategy—indeed, its title—stresses that America will take measures to sustain US global leadership. To do so the United States will focus on a combination of high technology and small footprint approaches, that is, on a smaller, leaner military force whose capability is magnified by advanced combat enablers of the sorts that were so important in Afghanistan. Central to the strategy, to compensate for the reduced force size, is that "U.S. forces will plan to operate whenever possible with allied and coalition forces."[41]

For Canada the new strategy points to both caution and opportunity. The caution involves ensuring from the outset that any future NATO crisis management operation it participates in, enjoys the core support and direction of the US government and military. The case examined here reveals there is no substitute for US leadership, vision and engagement. The opportunity lies in the fact that while America will still act in a leadership capacity, it will want, and need, dependable, capable allies that can contribute a robust combat capability. Canada—and others—will need to decide how to respond to this opportunity. "NATO is an *us* not a *them*," Beare has underscored, "try to think about it that way."[42] It is easy to fall into the mindset of looking for "NATO" to provide capabilities when what we need to do is look at our own individual, national, capabilities. As we look to the future of NATO's crisis management task, it is this sort of thinking that should frame our conceptual and concrete starting point.

39 Author interview with Vance.
40 Author interview with Hope.
41 Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, D.C., January 2012), 4.
42 Author interview with Beare.

STRATEGIC STUDIES WORKING GROUP

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