



## **THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS**

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# **AFGHANISTAN AS A TEST OF CANADIAN POLITICS: WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE?**

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## SUMMARY

This paper considers lessons that can be drawn from the Canadian effort in Afghanistan, especially the challenges of trying to build security, governance and development in Kandahar. First, it examines how the Canadian Forces (CF) adapted over time, both in Afghanistan and in Ottawa. Second, it looks at the challenges presented by a minority government and what can be learned from this political context. Third, it examines what was learned about the constraining forces on Canadian defence policy — the Opposition and public opinion — and evaluates the consequences for Canada's next military engagement. The paper concludes by developing the implications for Canada's future missions.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Bloc	Bloc Québécois
CANBAT	Canadian Battalions
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CEFCOM	Canadian Expeditionary Force Command
CF	Canadian Forces
DCDS	Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff
DND	Department of National Defence
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDHQ	National Defence Headquarters
NDP	New Democratic Party
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
UN	United Nations

## INTRODUCTION

People, organizations and political systems likely reveal more when they are under stress than when they are not; greater pressure reveals the weaknesses and strengths that would otherwise be hard to detect. Many of the problems plaguing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Afghanistan, for instance, also existed in Bosnia and Kosovo, but were of far less relevance and consequence since those missions did not involve nearly as much combat. Given Canada's role and the high level of conflict, the Canadian experience in Afghanistan should reveal a great deal about Canada's government and military.

Canada's involvement in this conflict has been longer than in any other war in recent memory;<sup>1</sup> while the mounting casualty toll is far lower than that of the two world wars or any recent conflict, it is still much greater than anticipated. The amount of money spent on the effort exceeds CDN\$20 billion. Canada's role in Afghanistan was the key foreign policy issue for an entire decade, occupying the minds and time of politicians, policy makers and the media.

Under the pressures of the conflict, the performance of Canadian institutions varied. The CF adapted quite well: Canadian generals altered command structures, empowered commanders in the field and were successful in obtaining new equipment. As a result of the CF's efforts, Canada went from being perceived poorly by its allies to being one of the war's principal burden-bearers. The Canadian political system, however, handled the conflict less well. The most difficult times of the Afghanistan mission coincided with a relatively rare phenomenon, a federal minority government. Perhaps being unaccustomed to first-hand wartime administration helps to explain why the various parties

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1 The idea that the war in Afghanistan is longer than the two world wars combined, something that Prime Minister Harper has repeatedly said, is actually quite misleading, given the orders of magnitudes of difference among the various conflicts and Canadian commitments.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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and politicians adapted poorly to the management of the effort. Finally, the Canadian public had to adjust to the realities of modern warfare — that soldiers do more than keep the peace.

By examining the reactions and adaptation of these various parts of the Canadian political scene to Canada's involvement in the Afghanistan conflict, it is possible to speculate how Canada is likely to react during future international crises; indeed, part of the conclusion addresses how the lessons of Afghanistan were applied to the NATO effort in Libya in 2011. To be clear, Canadian dynamics cannot be thought of completely in isolation — its partners, such as the Dutch, the British and the Australians were going through similar challenges during the Afghanistan effort. Comparisons will be made along the way to highlight common problems and the nations' varying responses.

## THE CF IN COMBAT

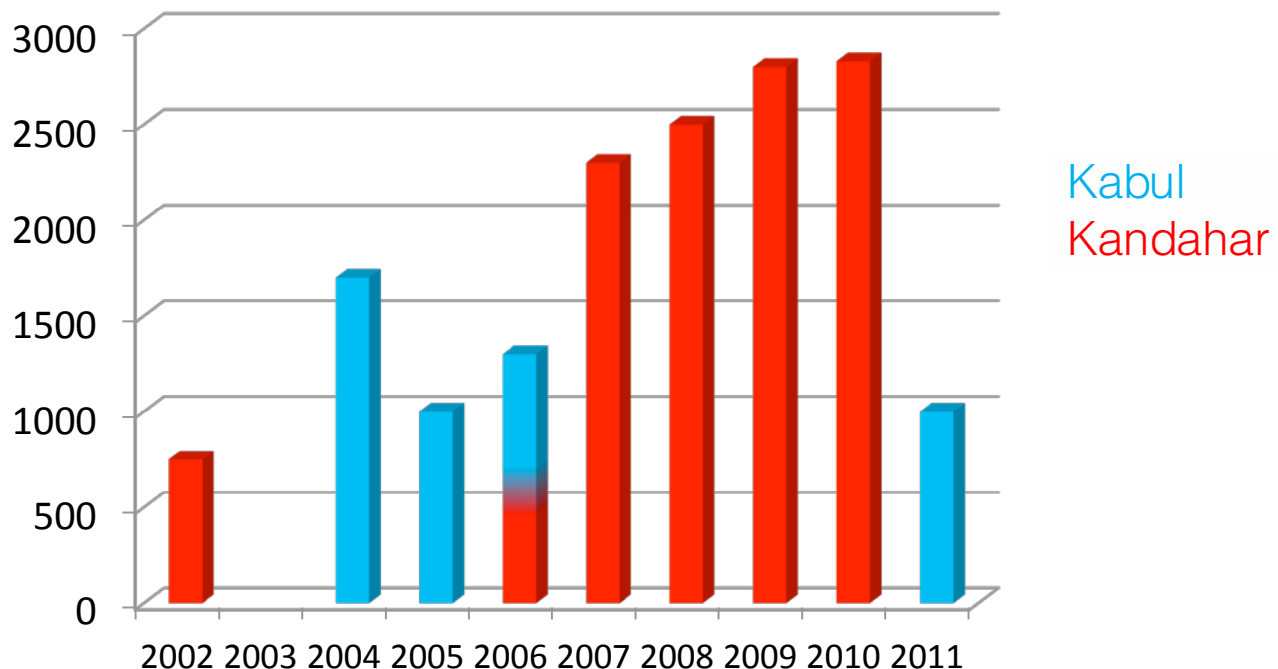
When Canadians think about the conflict in Afghanistan, they will almost certainly focus on the

years in Kandahar from 2005 to 2011, since that was the most costly and controversial period. While there may still be considerable debate about why Canada sent troops to the Taliban's home territory in the first place,<sup>2</sup> there is no doubt that the fighting there tested the Canadian military. Over the course of the mission — from Kandahar in 2002<sup>3</sup> to Kabul from 2003 to 2005, back to Kandahar in 2005 and then the Kabul-centric training mission (see Figure 1) — the CF grew from being considered among the least reliable to among the mission's most dependable allies. The CF changed how it did business both in Ottawa and in the field. Specifically, Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) General Rick Hillier set up new command structures at home and delegated more responsibility and authority to commanders in the field. Canada's time in Kandahar can teach us much about the importance of individuals and the impact of experience.

<sup>2</sup> For some of the opening rounds in this debate, see Stein and Lang (2007) and Brewster (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Canada's special operations unit, Joint Task Force 2, entered Afghanistan in December 2001, but little is known about its mission, as its activities are largely classified.

Figure 1: Canadian Deployments



Source: NATO.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The post-July 2011 training mission is "Kabul-centric," with most of the trainers in and near Kabul, but some in Herat and Mazer-e-Sharif. The numbers used to build this figure are from the NATO placemats ([www.isaf.nato.int/isaf-placemat-archives.html](http://www.isaf.nato.int/isaf-placemat-archives.html)), slides from presentations given by Canadian officers and newspaper accounts of the new training mission. Note that CF left Afghanistan in 2002 and returned in 2004.



## FROM LEAST RELIABLE TO MOST RELIABLE

In Bosnia and then in Afghanistan, the Canadian units were known as a contingent under tight constraints and micromanaged by Ottawa — so much so that the British units modified the usual NATO shorthand of CANBAT for Canadian Battalions to the sardonic CANTBAT. Rick Hillier made much of this ridicule in speeches and later in his memoir, *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (2009), and he pushed to change how the CF operated. Hillier's efforts were so successful that Canadian officers and politicians (forgetting their recent past and ignoring present "behind the wire" limits on the Kabul-centric training mission that commenced in 2011) began to scorn their allies under restrictions, known as caveats, which limited what their militaries could do. The transition from CANTBAT to CANBAT was quick yet profound.

In 2002, the CF deployed a battalion to Kandahar as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, supporting the American effort to fight al-Qaeda. This contingent had very strict rules of engagement, requiring phone calls to Ottawa for permission to engage in any operation where there was an escalated risk of collateral damage (harming civilians).<sup>5</sup> This rule might have made sense for pilots, but additional permission would likely also be required for any patrol leaving the gates of the base. As a result, the CF spent far more time guarding the base than out in the field.

When Canada returned to Afghanistan in 2003, this time to Kabul, CF commanders faced similarly restrictive rules of engagement. When Brigadier General Jocelyn Lacroix was sent to command NATO forces in 2003, his instructions included the following caveat: "NDHQ [National Defence Headquarters] authority is required, prior to committing CF personnel to any operations, wherein there is a reasonable belief that CF units or personnel may be exposed to a higher degree of risk" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> As a result, those Canadians in NATO command positions, such as Brigadier General Peter Devlin who served as commander of the Kabul Multinational Brigade in 2004, were required to draw upon other countries as the go-to units because they could not count on their own CF units to act quickly.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when Rick Hillier was named commander

of the International Security Assistance Force, he found that he could only ask, not order, the colonel commanding the Canadian contingent to deploy the forces. Hillier was often either denied or told to wait, which was incredibly frustrating and made operations more difficult, given the limited number of allied soldiers on the ground.

With experiences like these, it is hardly surprising that Hillier made significant changes when he became CDS. Empowered by Canadian institutions that make the typically symbolic position of governor general the commander-in-chief of the CF rather than the prime minister,<sup>8</sup> and by leveraging his own popularity, Hillier was able to make a variety of changes to the structures, attitudes and behaviours of the CF. He set up several new commands, the most relevant of which was the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM), which has been commanded by a series of land staff (army) lieutenant generals with substantial experience in Afghanistan or in matters relating to it. The changes moved the command of overseas operations from the Department of National Defence (DND) Headquarters in downtown Ottawa to a building on the outskirts of the city, and from the authority of the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (DCDS) to the Commander of the CEFCOM. This was a deliberate effort to distance operations from national politics and from the bureaucrats in the DND that Hillier lambastes in his memoir.

More directly, Hillier gave ground commanders significantly more latitude. Rather than having to ask permission before every action, commanders could act first and then explain later. Colonel Steve Noonan was the first to operate under these new rules, and in an interview with the author referred to them as "wide arcs of fire."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Brigadier General David Fraser had significant discretion about how to manage operations, despite the intensity of combat that occurred during his tenure as Commander of the CF in Afghanistan from February to November 2006, including Operation Medusa. In his instructions, Fraser was told "you have full freedom to authorize and conduct operations as you see fit" (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> This directive contrasts

5 Interview with Colonel (Ret.) Pat Stogran, when he was vice president of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, April 25, 2007.

6 DCDS Intent Task Force Kabul, December 19, 2003, A0241084, p. 6, acquired via an Access to Information request.

7 Interview with Major General (now Lieutenant General) Peter Devlin, May 15, 2009, Ottawa, Ontario.

8 Technically, the prime minister is not the commander-in-chief, so Prime Minister Paul Martin and later Prime Minister Stephen Harper could not order General Hillier to change the conduct of operations; rather, they could only threaten to fire him, a rather blunt instrument.

9 Interview with Colonel Noonan, Ottawa, Ontario, January 11, 2007.

10 Commander's Directive to Commander, Task Force Afghanistan, Rotation 2, (3350-165/A37) A0232107, p. 14, acquired via an Access to Information request.

sharply with the instructions provided to those who preceded Fraser and Noonan. Interviews with generals who served in Afghanistan and/or as CEFCOM commanders verify that this pattern continued until the end of the mission in Kandahar.<sup>11</sup>

## GENERATIONAL CHANGE

The difference between 2004 and 2006 is stark, marking a cultural revolution within the CF. Moving from risk aversion to risk management, from avoiding failure to making a difference, the CF changed how it operated. The shifts coincided with the change in leadership from General Ray Henault as CDS and Vice Admiral Greg Maddison as his deputy, to General Rick Hillier as the new CDS with a command team of veterans of peace operations in Bosnia and combat in Afghanistan. The former were in senior posts during the scandal following the public beating-to-death of a Somali teenager at the hands of two Canadian soldiers in 1993 (Bercuson, 1996), while the latter were placed into command positions during the “decade of darkness” that ensued. These experiences fostered different orientations towards organization and command between the two generations of leadership.

The reaction by politicians and the public to the debacle in Somalia so wounded the next generation of senior officers that they focused far more on avoiding failure than achieving success. The restrictions imposed on Canadian contingents in Bosnia and early on in Afghanistan came not from the civilians, but from Henault, Maddison and their predecessors. This one salient experience in Somalia quite clearly shaped their thinking.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Hillier,<sup>13</sup> his deputy Walt Natynczyk (who is now the CDS), and the rest of the command staff after 2005 reacted to events that they experienced during this decade of darkness. Finding themselves micromanaged from Ottawa and perceived as less reliable than other allied countries during NATO operations in the Balkans, these officers adopted a

new command philosophy, borrowing ideas from US military doctrine. This doctrine viewed delegating to commanders and managing risks — as opposed to avoiding them — as common sense.

Hillier and his generation of commanders not only sought to change how the CF operated, but also how it was perceived at home and abroad. The effort in Afghanistan has done much to dispel the perception that Canadian forces are just peacekeepers, by demonstrating that they are also combat-capable troops willing to take risks and spill blood. Taking casualties has been no hindrance to career advancement, as nearly every Canadian commanding in Afghanistan has been promoted and given important new positions, up to and including the CEFCOM commander. Indeed, some experts have suggested that Canada ended up in Kandahar rather than a less hostile province because the CF was most enthusiastic about the option that would give it a more visible role.<sup>14</sup>

## THE CF IN CONTEXT

Before moving on, it is important to put the Canadian military contribution in context. Despite the new Canadian mythology, Canada was neither the only NATO country facing a tough assignment, nor was it fighting alone. The British and the Danes were fighting in Helmand — usually the most violent part of Afghanistan (thanks in part to its thriving poppy crops) — suffering as many or more casualties per capita as the Canadians. Canada has had frequent help in various forms from other countries, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, particularly since Canada had no helicopters in Afghanistan until relatively late in the mission.

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11 Interviews with Generals Tim Grant (February 2008), Guy Laroche (September 2010), and Jonathan Vance (June 2011), who commanded in Kandahar, and Generals Michel Gauthier (September 2007) and Marc Lessard (January 2010, August 2011) who served as CEFCOM.

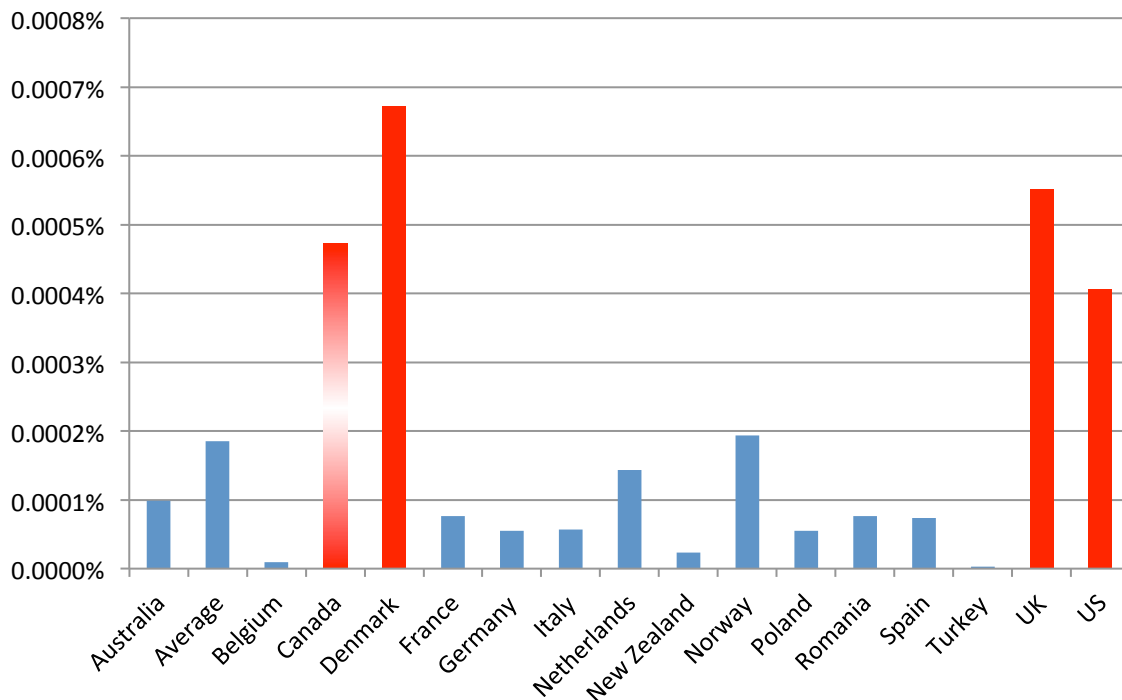
12 In a series of interviews with active and retired officers in 2007, the first to mention Somalia was Maddison. In a subsequent interview, Henault conceded that Somalia affected his views. Interviews with civilians working at NDHQ at the time confirm the risk-averse attitudes shared by the command staff prior to 2005.

13 Hillier’s memoir contains many stories indicating how much he chafed under the rules imposed after Somalia.

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14 Stein and Lang (2007) overstate the military’s influence, as other agencies also wanted the CF to deploy to Kandahar, and their argument about the military’s inclination to placate the United States understates other interests that probably drove the CF as much, if not more.

Figure 2: Burden-Sharing: Killed in Action per Capita



It is also true, however, that a variety of NATO and non-NATO countries involved in Afghanistan had caveats — restrictions on how they could be deployed — that limited how much assistance Canada could receive (Saideman and Auerswald, 2012). German forces, for instance, could not move outside of their sector, Regional Command North and until mid-2009, could not engage in offensive operations. Even if they could have come to Kandahar, they would have been less than useful. The Italians, despite promises to the contrary, have never left their areas of responsibility (Regional Command West and Kabul). Similarly constrained were Spain, Norway, Sweden and others. As a result of these limitations, Canadian politicians became quite vocal about the caveat problem, forgetting that Canada was similarly restrained before 2005 (and has been again since July 2011).

Because Canada had few allies willing to help out, for much of the mission there were simply not enough troops on the ground to do the job well. Instead of residing with the Afghans as counterinsurgency doctrine requires (US Department of the Army, 2006), the CF was forced to respond to each emergency as if it was a fire brigade. NATO’s “clear, hold, build” strategy<sup>15</sup>

only works if the counterinsurgents can stick around long enough to hold captured terrain and to train the Afghans so that responsibility can be transferred. It was not until the arrival of the American surge in 2010 that there were enough reliable counterinsurgents to build Afghan confidence that the ground would be held long enough for the rest of the process to take place.

**WHAT LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN ABOUT THE CF?**

The CF, like any modern military, spends a great deal of effort on “lessons learned” exercises in order not to repeat past mistakes. Over time, it will become clearer what they have learned (and what they think they have learned), but for the time being, a few broad lessons can be extracted.

The phrase “punch above weight” is tired and everyone except the United States has tried to use it, but there is something to it. The CF made a big difference in Afghanistan — although perhaps not a sustainable one — by preventing the loss of Kandahar despite experiencing shortages of both personnel and equipment (more specifically the lack of helicopters). Canada’s allies noted this important achievement so that Canada’s influence in NATO and Afghanistan

15 “Clear, hold, build” refers to the effort to remove insurgents from an area, secure it from being retaken and build Afghan governance and confidence in the government so that the gains are lasting.



increased accordingly.<sup>16</sup> While NATO's decisions are formally made by its entire membership, in practice, initial discussions for major decisions involve those perceived as the most significant contributors. In the past, this meant those with the largest contingents,<sup>17</sup> but in Afghanistan, it was not just about the size of contingents but where and how they were deployed. Canada carried far more weight than the larger German and Italian contingents since the CF was deployed in one of the most difficult areas of Afghanistan and was engaging in significant combat. Germany, Italy and other European powers thus spent more time at NATO meetings defending themselves from criticisms about their caveats than asserting influence over how NATO should conduct operations. So, the first lesson is that influence now comes to those that do, not to those who are just present.

It is no accident that the Libyan mission was commanded by a Canadian after the country's performance in Afghanistan; Canadians, however, should not get too smug given that we are less than a decade removed from the CANTBAT era and the restrictions<sup>18</sup> on the post-Kandahar training mission will reduce Canada's impact.

The second set of lessons addresses the CF's limitations. It is important not to forget that Canada's military cannot operate on its own. It is too small and missing too many capabilities to conduct modern warfare without bigger and better-equipped friends. The realization that some of the potential partners have significant restrictions, however, means that Canada must be wary about the countries with which it partners. Reports about the controversial Kandahar deployment decision indicate that the CF was reluctant to work with the Italians even in potentially safer regions because of concerns about Italian restrictions (Saunders, 2012).

The Canadian experience over the past 10 years teaches us that the CF can facilitate reform and adaptation. Canadian soldiers, with their green camouflage gear and

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16 This was reported in multiple interviews from 2008–2011 with Canadians, Americans and others based at various NATO headquarters and national capitals.

17 In 2001-2002, I observed this process playing out from my vantage point as a desk officer on the US Joint Staff's Bosnia desk. A series of meetings were held where the five largest contributors — the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy (known as the QUINT countries) — met to frame the agenda for regionalizing the three Balkan operations in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

18 Press coverage of the new mission has made it clear that the Canadian trainers will have very restrictive caveats: not to engage in offensive operations, not to operate outside of the bases, and so on.

tight restrictions, were poorly suited to go to Kandahar in 2002. The rise of a new generation of officers led to significant and quick changes in the CF's operations. While there are now debates in Canada about the financial efficiency of having a separate command for operations outside of North America, it is clear that Hillier's institutional reforms made the CF more agile in Afghanistan. Although these changes had much to do with Hillier's personality and his personal power, the CF did not change much after his retirement, as the rest of the current generation of generals shared his experiences and views as the result of having serious combat experience in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

It turned out that the culture of risk aversion was not that deep. The new question concerns the depth and extent of the new culture of risk management. Given how many Canadian officers served in Afghanistan, it is likely that the next several generations of land staff officers will hold beliefs similar to those of the current set of commanders. There might be some variation among the other officers in the CF given that only limited air and naval officers served in Afghanistan. While Canadians may like to think that there are no differences among the services in a unified CF, the reality is that experience drives attitudes and there are significant variations in experience among the CF's branches.

The final lesson drawn from this experience is that the CF poses significant challenges to the prime minister. Hillier, in particular, proved to be a handful, because he was quite visible in the media and quite willing to speak his mind, albeit selectively.<sup>20</sup> Minister of National Defence Gordon O'Connor did not get along with Hillier, exacerbating the problem for Harper (Brewster, 2011). When the time came for Hillier to be replaced, Harper chose the most soft-spoken of the three Army candidates, Walter Natynczyk, in an effort to assert greater control over the military, but he only succeeded in muffling its message. That is, the military's public relations staff faced constraints about what they could say, similar to the constraints faced by civilian staff in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and in the Canadian International Development

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19 While the current CDS, General Walter Natynczyk, is practically alone among senior army officers in having no Afghan experience, he served in Baghdad during the early stages of the war. In 2003, he was serving at Fort Hood in Texas in an exchange relationship (the same position Hillier held a few years earlier) when that unit was sent to Iraq.

20 For someone often portrayed as outspoken, Hillier could be quite careful. I interviewed him in 2008 when the mandate renewal was being debated in Parliament, and found that he was quite selective about what he was willing to talk about openly.

Agency. However, the military continued to run operations as it saw fit until, as discussed below, Harper was able to design a new mission that left the CF with no room to manoeuvre.<sup>21</sup>

## MINORITY GOVERNMENT AT WAR

In theory, the formal commander-in-chief of the CF is the Governor General of Canada, who is the Queen's representative, but in practice, the prime minister is empowered by Canadian governing institutions to decide where and when troops are to be deployed, and has generally delegated military decisions to the CDS. Usually, Canada's prime minister is quite powerful, granted much authority from the majority party in Parliament. The parliamentary rank and file have little influence over daily conflict decisions and exercise practically no oversight over military operations; indeed, Members of Parliament (MPs) do not even have security clearances, which would make it difficult for them to know what questions to ask or decisions to make, were they ever to be given power over conflict decisions.<sup>22</sup>

That Parliament is a relatively weak player when it comes to military caveats may seem surprising given recent Canadian election results. The Liberal Party's majority government elected in 2000 was followed by minority party rule under the Liberals in 2004, and then under the Conservatives in 2006 and 2008. Only in 2011 did the Conservatives gain a majority of seats. One would think that minority government cabinets would be sensitive to the Opposition's concerns, if only to avoid no-confidence votes, giving Parliament significant influence over how the military can be used.<sup>23</sup> That has not been the case, however, in large part because the makeup of the four major political parties makes it nearly impossible to form a stable Opposition coalition. The two main parties, the Conservatives and

Liberals, are on opposite sides of most issues. The Bloc Québécois (Bloc) is not an appealing or viable partner for either main party due to its separatist agenda; it has indeed spoiled Liberal and New Democratic Party (NDP) hopes of a left-leaning coalition. The result is that Canadian prime ministers, even when leading minority governments, are in a relatively strong position to make policy without the Opposition's consent or input.

That said, because it was a minority government, Parliament had to periodically reauthorize the overall Canadian mission in Afghanistan, which, in theory, allowed it to exert some influence over the conduct of the mission.<sup>24</sup> The first extension, granted in 2006, was not very controversial, although the opposition parties were upset that Prime Minister Harper rushed it through the parliamentary process. The second extension was both more controversial and consequential.

## THE SECOND EXTENSION

The first extension was set to expire in 2009 and, therefore, a new decision was required in 2008 so that the CF could plan its next moves to leave, alter or extend the mission. Between 2006 and 2008, the Liberals distanced themselves from the Kandahar mission, even though it was a mission they had started. They argued that Prime Minister Harper did not care about development and reconstruction, and pursued only combat.<sup>25</sup> To get another extension through a hostile Parliament, Harper created an independent, non-partisan commission, the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan (the Manley Panel), headed by senior Liberal John Manley, to consider the mission and develop recommendations. The final report of the panel<sup>26</sup> provided the Liberals with the political cover (to influence the next phase of the mission after doing the due diligence of investigating the effort) to vote with the Conservative resolution to extend the mission to 2011. However, it also tied Harper's hands, as he was largely bound by the report's recommendations, which suggested that NATO and Canada:

21 This is my interpretation based on conversations with experts, officers in the military and officials in various positions.

22 When interviewing an MP, I was surprised to learn that not even members of the Defence Committee have security clearances. Only the ministers and heads of opposition parties have such clearances. British-style parliaments tend to focus on question time (in Canada, question period) rather than hearings behind closed doors, unlike European-style parliaments and presidential systems. As a result of that one conversation, I am in the midst of a research project comparing British-style parliaments and military oversight. I am indebted to former Prime Minister Paul Martin, who pushed me to make the proper comparisons at the end of an interview I had with him in Montreal on March 29, 2007.

23 There was some discussion by some of the Liberals in the 2008 debate about restricting the CF from engaging in offensive operations, but this was not added to the mandate legislation.

24 Parliamentary votes on foreign deployments are not required by the Canadian constitution (as they are in Germany), but are instead required by the politics of minority government in Canada. There has been much debate recently about when a vote in Parliament is required with no clarity on the subject.

25 The Liberals appear to have forgotten that the "enemy gets a vote," which means that outcomes on the battlefield depend not just on what the Canadians were doing, but what the insurgents were doing. Many people, not just Canadians, were surprised by the intensity of the violence in 2006.

26 The Manley Panel toured Afghanistan in late fall 2007. I was part of a group of academics visiting Afghanistan in December of that same year, and we ended up receiving many of the same briefings as the Manley Panel.

- develop a comprehensive approach to integrate the three main efforts — security, governance and development;
- deploy more helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles;
- demand additional NATO troops in the province;
- achieve better coordination at home;
- launch signature development projects; and
- provide more regular progress reports.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the much vaguer first mandate, these recommendations were put directly into the bill going through Parliament.<sup>28</sup> Once the bill was passed, the Harper government largely implemented the recommendations.<sup>29</sup> Canada's diplomats and military representatives did push successfully at NATO headquarters for a comprehensive plan.<sup>30</sup> More and better air assets were purchased or leased to lessen the risks of casualties from roadside bombs. The United States sent an additional battalion of troops to Kandahar to meet the Manley Report's recommendations. While the prime minister did not take a leading role as the report recommended, the Cabinet Committee on Afghanistan was organized and David Mulroney was assigned to the Privy Council Office in Ottawa as Deputy Minister responsible for the Afghanistan Task Force.

By getting a senior Liberal politician to support the extension of the mission and by agreeing to focus more on the diplomatic and development side of the effort, Prime Minister Harper managed to get enough votes to extend the mission to 2011. The Opposition had limited leverage for several reasons. First, failing to authorize Canadian participation is a very blunt stick. Given that this was a United Nations-sanctioned NATO mission,

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27 The Manley Panel also recommended better government communications about the governance and development efforts, which did not really happen as message control was tightly held by the Prime Minister's Office.

28 For the first mandate, see Canada. Parliament. House of Commons (2006). *Journals*. 39th Parliament, 1st Session. No. 25 (May 17). Ottawa: Queen's Printer. For the second, see Canada. Parliament. House of Commons (2008). *Journals*. 39th Parliament, 2nd Session. No. 66 (March 13). Ottawa: Queen's Printer.

29 Office of the Prime Minister (2008). "Prime Minister announces decisive action on Afghanistan Panel recommendations." News Release. February 8. Available at: <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1985>.

30 In interviews in Brussels in January and February 2011, Canadian diplomats and representatives of other countries gave the Canadians much credit for the adoption of a comprehensive approach.

unilateral withdrawal would have been controversial and damaging to both the mission and Canada's reputation. Being second to leave in 2011 was less problematic than being the first to leave in 2009. Second, getting the Opposition to agree to an alternative was quite difficult, given that the Liberals, NDP and the Bloc did not see eye to eye on most things. On Afghanistan, the NDP and the Bloc were opposed to the mission outright, whereas the Liberals were caught between their old policy and their desire to oppose the Harper government. The Manley Report made it hard for the Liberals to push for an end to the mission, and putting restrictions on the mission would have required all three opposition parties to cooperate. There was some talk of imposing a caveat about offensive operations, but that did not gain much momentum. Consequently, the Manley Report set the stage for an extension that did do one thing the Liberals demanded — place a greater emphasis on the civilian side of the mission. Without any restrictions imposed by Parliament, the CDS (and his subordinates) remained the key actors shaping the operations on the ground.

Harper used the mandate granted in 2008 as an answer to any questions about an extension again in 2011, arguing that the mandate stipulated that the combat mission in Kandahar would end in July 2011.<sup>31</sup> He seemed to lose interest in the mission, perhaps because he understood it cost him votes in Quebec. In late 2010, after a long silence on the issue, Harper announced that a new mission — training Afghan security forces in Kabul — would begin in July 2011.<sup>32</sup> This departure was clearly a response to American and NATO pressure. There had been some discussion among the Liberals of a follow-up training mission, which they nearly abandoned once Harper started discussing the proposal.

Because the timing of the decision was more or less at the last minute, and because the mission itself was so limited, it seemed as if Harper was trying to do as little as possible. This might have been a case where international pressures required a response, but either because of his concerns about the upcoming election or because of his own disinterest, Harper chose to do the minimum. The current majority government may ultimately reveal in future decisions whether it was the

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31 The use of the mandate as a shield was necessary, in part, because the Manley Report itself contained arguments that not only applied to 2008-2009, but would have also implied a renewal in 2011. See the Manley Report, (2008: 31-32).

32 It is interesting that the Manley Report (2008: 30) suggests that there is not a "clear line between the training role and combat activity." This contrasts quite sharply with the new training mission.



challenge of getting votes in Parliament that mattered, or Harper's own lack of personal interest in the matter. It is not entirely clear what Harper thinks about the Afghanistan effort as he has mostly been silent about the campaign, just as he has been largely silent about the Libyan operation (Clark, 2011). The striking thing is that Harper has continued to restrict what people say about the mission while the military decides how it operates.

## LIMITED LEARNING

It is harder to draw lessons from the domestic politics during Canada's time in Afghanistan than from the military, since the 2011 election fundamentally changed the balance of power. The Liberals were crushed; the Bloc took a huge hit as well, so the NDP is the only real Opposition at the moment. With a Conservative majority, the NDP has little influence, and whatever influence it has is muddled by the loss of their leader, Jack Layton, and an inexperienced caucus. Still, some patterns remain intact.

First, it appears that Prime Minister Harper does not like these military operations, as both the structures of Canadian institutions and the increasing public popularity of the CF make it hard to control the military.<sup>33</sup> To be clear, Canadians do not want the military to flout civilian control, but the higher profile of the military means that its leaders are less willing to acquiesce to civilians, especially when they are asked to take the blame for civilians' decisions, such as the deployment to Kandahar. Given his popularity, Hillier could speak more openly about a variety of issues than his predecessors could when the military was much less respected. Since the prime minister has only a rather blunt instrument for controlling the military — hiring and firing the CDS — a more confident military makes civilian control a bit more complicated. Considering more recent military efforts brings to light the lessons that may have motivated Harper's actions.

The post-Kandahar training mission and the Libyan campaign both started while the Conservatives had a minority government, but Harper's parliamentary majority win did not lead to any real changes in the missions. Both were constrained by design. The training mission does not include mentoring in the field, which would be quite risky, and continues to be solely "behind the wire." There are dangers, as

illustrated by the death of Master Corporal Byron Greff on October 29, 2011, when a suicide bomber attacked a convoy moving NATO troops from one training base to another. Still, the design of the mission limits the CF from using force for anything more than self-defence. Canada's participation in Operation Unified Protector reflected some consistency with the latter stages of the Afghan mission. The deployment of CF-18s and ships represented a significant, but relatively less risky commitment and Harper repeatedly refused to commit to any ground campaign.

Yet, these missions continue because Harper remains committed to NATO. When there are significant international pressures placed on Canada, Harper consents to continued military efforts, whether it is a training mission behind the wire in places that seem to be safer than Kandahar, or a bombing campaign against a country whose air defence systems have already been taken out by the United States. These constrained missions may conflict with Harper's recent rhetoric of how very dangerous the world may be — that is, the foreign policy stance is one of fear and concern (Paris, 2012), but so far the defence policy remains one of restraint, restrictions and risk aversion.

The Afghanistan experience demonstrated that the Liberals are a party in deep trouble. Even before the 2011 election ended many political careers, the Liberal Party had been losing credibility at a rapid rate. Once it lost the 2006 election, the party felt duty bound to oppose the Kandahar mission, even though it had initiated the expedition. Perhaps the job of an opposition party is to oppose, but the reasons for the opposition hardly stand up to scrutiny:

- The deployment required more resources than expected, preventing the CF from peacekeeping elsewhere, such as Haiti, Darfur or the Middle East. Yes, but this criticism ignored a few basic realities: that a real mission to Darfur would require Sudan's approval or defeat; that Canada could only go to Darfur with NATO (given the CF's limitations); and there was no peace in the Middle East to keep.
- Canada was doing less development and reconstruction in 2006-2007 than the Liberals had intended; however, this fact had much less to do with Harper's intent and much more to do with the level of violence in Kandahar, including the death of senior diplomat Glynn Berry.

<sup>33</sup> For more on Harper as a "control freak," see the CBC background on Harper, available at: [www.cbc.ca/news/background/harper\\_stephen/](http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/harper_stephen/) and Lawrence Martin's *Harperland: The Politics of Control* (2010), which focuses on Harper's first four years as prime minister.

- Canada was supposed to rotate in and out of Kandahar and not make a long-term commitment. This expectation was not only unrealistic in light of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan (successful counterinsurgency does not allow such rotations), but ignored lessons from Bosnia. In Bosnia, Canada rotated command of its sector, but it did not leave until it was transitioned from a NATO to a European Union operation.

These inherently weak reasons to oppose the mission, along with lousy leadership, produced division within the party, allowing Harper to manipulate the situation via the Manley Report in order to extend the mission.

The NDP and the Bloc played limited roles in the debate because they opposed the mission outright. Their avowed pacifism made it hard for them to make demands. Instead, alongside the Liberals, they tended to focus on one single aspect of the mission: the question of detainees.

### Detainee Diversion

Perhaps as a legacy of Somalia; perhaps because it was an apparently simple issue; perhaps because it did not require any real knowledge of counterinsurgency or Afghanistan — whatever the reason, the opposing parties leapt on the issue of whether CF turned over detainees to Afghan authorities who then beat them.<sup>34</sup> To be clear, the issue of how detainees are treated is a serious one, as it deals with the possibility of human rights violations and breaches of international conventions. It is not clear, however, why this would be the focal point of criticism of the mission, given that other countries faced the exact same problem in Afghanistan. The controversies were not about whether Canadian soldiers were beating prisoners, but rather whether the Afghans did so after the detainees were transferred to them. At no time was there a serious concern that the CF was asking the Afghan authorities to torture prisoners for them à la extraordinary rendition, American-style.

While the initial critics were correct to point out that the oversight procedures crafted under the Martin government were flawed, the parliamentarians did not seem to notice that the detainee dilemma was one that all NATO countries were facing in Afghanistan. The dilemma was and remains this: Afghanistan had a very

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<sup>34</sup> The media, despite the brave efforts of individual reporters, also learned the wrong lessons from past efforts and focused more on detainees and less on the bigger issues.

different tradition of prisoner treatment, and NATO was/is supposed to treat Afghanistan as a sovereign power. Decrying the former violates the latter. Beyond this dilemma, the Opposition largely overlooked the fact that the CF did stop the flow of detainees at various points in time during the Kandahar mission as a result of concerns about how the prisoners would be treated.<sup>35</sup> Much effort was spent training Afghan wardens and guards to treat their prisoners more humanely, so much so that progress reports indicated how much better the prisoners were being treated — when the Afghans were successful in keeping them inside the prisons.<sup>36</sup>

The real point here is that the detainee issue, while important, should not have been the central focus of parliamentarians. MPs should have spent more time asking whether the troops were appropriately equipped, whether aid was going to corrupt individuals, whether the aim of fostering a self-sustaining Afghanistan was unrealistic, whether there was sufficient cooperation among the various agencies, and so on. The central question of what Canada was getting for its investment of “blood and treasure” was largely ignored, perhaps because the Opposition was most interested in “opposing for the sake of opposing,” rather than providing useful criticism. Ultimately, the detainee issue served as the “shiny object” that could fascinate MPs and the media. If the purpose of parliamentary debate and of question period is to inform the Canadian public, it is no wonder that they were confused — measuring effectiveness was incredibly difficult.

### PUBLIC REACTIONS

The mission, like most military operations by democracies, began with a high degree of public support, which then fell over time. It is no accident that, as Figure 3 illustrates, public support dropped quite dramatically just as Canadian troops took far heavier casualties in the fall of 2006. Operation Medusa was the most serious combat the Canadians had seen since Korea, and served as quite a shock to the Canadian public.

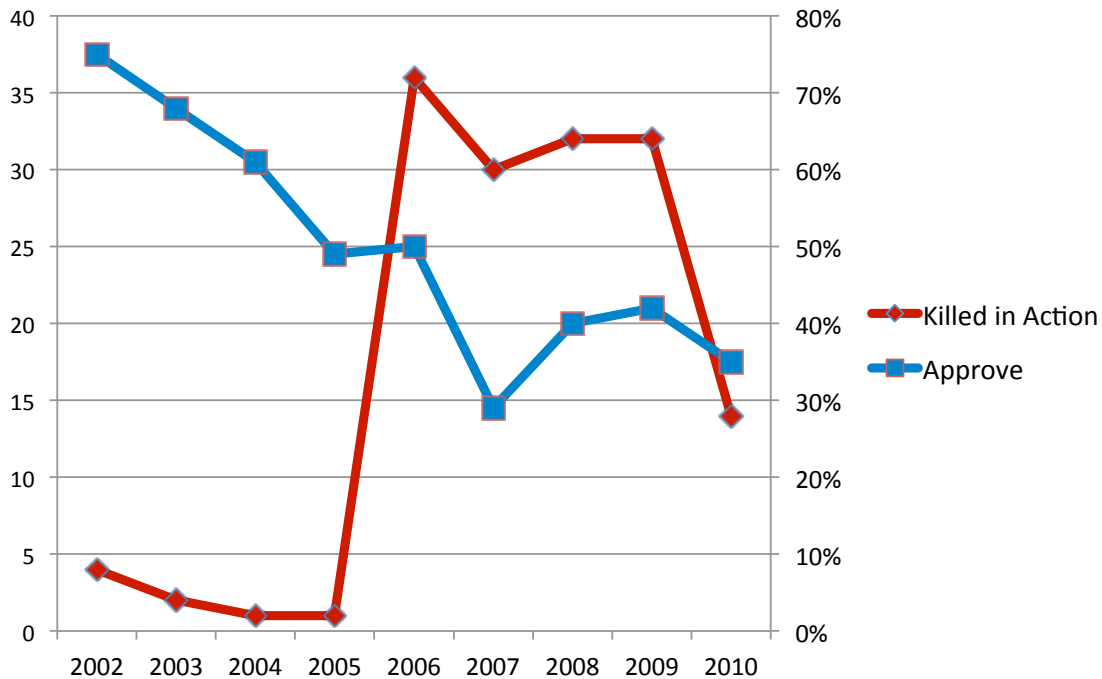
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<sup>35</sup> While visiting the short-term detainment facility during my DND/NATO tour of Afghanistan in December 2007, our group interacted with Canadian MPs, and we learned that transfers had been suspended at that time.

<sup>36</sup> In an interview with officials from the Department of Public Safety, it was clear that in the face of limited time and personnel, the Canadian training of Afghan corrections personnel focused on treatment of prisoners and not on preventing escapes. This is understandable given the pressures from the media and Parliament, but problematic from the standpoints of security sector reform and mission success.



Figure 3: Casualties and Public Approval of the Afghanistan Mission



Source: Angus Reid and I-Casualties.Org<sup>37</sup>

37 The public opinion figures come from Angus Reid surveys performed on a regular basis and available at [www.angus-reid.com/issue/afghanistan/](http://www.angus-reid.com/issue/afghanistan/). The casualty statistics are from [i-casualties.org](http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/Nationality.aspx?hndQry=Canada), available at: [www.icasualties.org/OEF/Nationality.aspx?hndQry=Canada](http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/Nationality.aspx?hndQry=Canada).

It is not entirely clear, however, if mounting Canadian casualties alone caused the drop in public approval, because something else coincided with the decline: the Canadian troops were killing insurgents.<sup>38</sup> While previous casualties and combat might have suggested that the CF was not doing peacekeeping, the late summer to early fall battles made it abundantly clear that the mission was one of combat, with development and governance taking a back seat. It is also important to note that as the annual CF casualty toll declined in 2010, public opinion did not bounce back.

There were a lot of reasons for the Canadian public to lose its enthusiasm for the effort. Success seemed elusive as attacks continued throughout Kandahar and the rest of the country. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, a NATO ally, corrupted an election after briefly supporting a “rape” law that undercut promises of better treatment for women.<sup>39</sup> Repeated prison breaks

challenged the ability of Canadian officials to say that the situation was improving.

The drop in public opinion cannot be pinned down to casualties alone, but it is evident from this case that Canadians cease supporting missions when they become difficult and confusing. Perhaps if the politicians had stood in front of the mission rather than hiding from it, public opinion might have stayed strong.<sup>40</sup> Given the challenges of a minority government and of this particular mission, it would have been unrealistic to expect politicians to either lead more assertively or for the public to follow more enthusiastically.<sup>41</sup>

38 For a nuanced study of casualties and Canadian public opinion, see Boucher (2010).

39 This law was seen legalizing rape in marriage and setting back whatever efforts were being made on behalf of women in Afghanistan.

40 This is one of the points of convergence in the scholarly literature on casualties and public opinion: support lasts longer if the politicians present a relatively united front.

41 The Danes, however, managed to do both. Their politicians led, and their public did support the mission, even as Denmark accrued the highest number of casualties per capita.

## LIBYA LESSONS

It appears that some of the knowledge acquired from the experience in Afghanistan was applied to the Libyan intervention. Canada was one of the major participants in the effort to protect the Libyans (by changing the regime), as one of only eight NATO countries to participate in the air strike component of the mission, and with CF Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard filling the NATO command slot. This mission meshed well with Canadian national interests, not only because it involved supporting a multilateral UN-mandated NATO operation, but also because it involved supporting the Canadian-nurtured Responsibility to Protect (R2P) paradigm, even if Harper himself staunchly opposes the term and the doctrine.

Because of the dual nature of the mission as both fulfilling NATO responsibilities and living up to R2P, the Opposition went along with the initial deployment, as the Liberals and NDP could focus on the enforcement of UN resolutions. All parties agreed that the commitment should not include “boots on the ground,” having realized that Canadians are not enthusiastic about significant sacrifices for such efforts. Indeed, a plurality of the public supported the mission in June of 2011, but with significant opposition and a potentially large swing component of unsure people (Abacus Data, 2011).

Harper’s “no boots on the ground” pledge probably reflected several lessons he learned from the Afghanistan experience. First, Harper designed a mission limiting the military’s ability to get the prime minister into hot water: he learned from the Afghan experience that the CF decides how to run operations, so he needed to design missions that limited the military’s choices. The new Kabul-centric training mission was designed to limit risk — behind the wire means fewer casualties. An air campaign after the Americans destroyed Libya’s defences was similarly low risk. Second, although there is no constitutional requirement for a vote on such missions, the Afghan precedent left the Opposition with an expectation to debate the mission even if they could not authorize or veto it. Ground troops would have been far more likely to cause a troublesome debate at home. Third, being quiet works: Harper did not stand in front of the mission for most of the effort in Afghanistan, clearly trying to minimize the political costs as the mission became unpopular. The same strategy served him well in Libya (Clark, 2011).

The CF continued operating as it had in Afghanistan after 2005. While CEFCOM was involved in the targeting process, there was little interference from on high. The commanders on the ground and in the air had the authority to make decisions about whether or not to drop bombs. While they kept the command staff back home informed, the Canadian commanders did not have to call home for permission, enabling them to play a very active role in the air campaign.

## IMPLICATIONS

What will Canada do in the future? Given the costs of Afghanistan in blood and treasure and perceived votes, it is unlikely that we will see another Canadian counterinsurgency campaign in the foreseeable future. The CF learned that it can get more credit and gain more influence with fewer restrictions at the same time that Canadian politicians realized that these kinds of missions are hard to sell back home. This realization, combined with a defence budget crisis, suggests that Canadian leaders are unlikely to deploy forces into harm’s way. The Libyan mission indicates that “no boots on the ground” will be a recurring theme. The procurement of F-35s and of ships reveal that the land forces will not be a priority over the next two decades, and the mission in Afghanistan has taught the government that deploying the army is far more expensive than sending a handful of planes and ships.

Still, politicians have short memories, so it is possible (if not likely) that Canadians will be sent abroad again as part of UN and NATO missions. An entire generation of military officers has experienced relative freedom on the ground and has been rewarded for working hard in support of the allies. It is likely, then, that the next sets of command groups in Ottawa will have similar attitudes. They will continue to delegate to the troops in the field until there is a major mission failure. That is, unless another fiasco on the scale of Somalia occurs, we should expect more of the same.

With three of the four major parties in significant flux right now, it is hard to say how Canadian politics will operate down the road. Stephen Harper has realized that military operations can be quite challenging. He learned that his freedom was not entirely constrained by minority government, given the divisions amongst the Opposition. Now that he has a majority, he can hold debates and even votes without any fear of the government collapsing. Yet he has, thus far, not revisited the decisions that were undertaken previously, so the “Kabul-centric” training mission will remain behind the wire. Given his reputation for being controlling, it

is unlikely that Harper will sign onto any new missions that would give the CF lots of room to manoeuvre.

The other parties are largely irrelevant for now, particularly as they are focused on their own leadership crises. The NDP has been largely pacifist. It will likely draw from the Afghanistan experience lessons on how to better sell its position to the public rather than on improving the use of force. It is unlikely that an NDP-led government would do anything more than send troops to a UN peacekeeping operation that would already have significant restrictions on the use of force. The Liberals are unlikely to be relevant anytime in the near future, but their traditional support of UN and NATO efforts means they would likely join in most multilateral efforts. However, their flip-flopping on Afghanistan will make it hard for them to be decisive in the future and they may look to other parties to share the responsibility of any deployment.

In a future effort, the Canadian public will be less surprised by casualties and combat, but enduring support will be rare. Public support for the Libyan operation never reached the heights of the Afghan mission despite the R2P justification. Perhaps after a few years without significant combat Canadians might find themselves more enthusiastic about expeditions abroad, but, given the recent costs and the current budget climate, the lesson the public probably learned is: not right now, thanks.

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