

AFGHANISTAN, DARFUR AND THE GREAT (UNEXPECTED) DEBATE OVER CANADA'S MILITARY ROLE IN THE WORLD



David Rudd

The May 17 debate and vote in the House of Commons on extending Canada's mission in Afghanistan was the first serious debate on Canada's military role in the world in recent memory, writes the president of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies. While Stephen Harper's Conservatives won the vote by a narrow 149-145 margin, with the help of 24 Liberals, the prime minister now owns a dangerous mission he inherited from the previous government. And then there is the question of whether Canada should play a larger role in any UN peacekeeping force in strife-torn Darfur. After a decade and more of neglect, after years of being off the political radar, the Armed Forces and their role have taken centre stage.

Le vote du 17 mai à la Chambre des communes sur la prolongation de la mission canadienne en Afghanistan a donné lieu au premier véritable débat de récente mémoire sur l'action militaire du Canada dans le monde, affirme le président de l'Institut canadien d'études stratégiques. Les conservateurs l'ayant emporté de justesse par 149 voix contre 145 grâce à l'appui de 24 libéraux, Stephen Harper a donc fait sienne une périlleuse mission héritée du précédent gouvernement. Et sans doute lui faudra-t-il prochainement déterminer l'ampleur de la participation canadienne à une éventuelle force de maintien de la paix de l'ONU au Darfour. Après plus d'une décennie d'incurie et d'invisibilité sur l'échiquier politique, nos forces armées — et le rôle qu'elles doivent jouer — reviennent à l'avant-plan.

On May 17 something extraordinary happened in the House of Commons. Parliamentarians held the closest thing to a serious debate on a military mission of direct relevance to Canada's national security in recent memory. A "serious" debate is one that is protracted, that compels Canadians to decide what they truly stand for, that calls upon their (admittedly incomplete) knowledge of their own history and that of a faraway land, and that does not (yet) involve intemperate language or taking the name of George W. Bush in vain.

The debate, which the government won by the slimmest of majorities, was over the nature and scope of Canada's mission in Afghanistan. Having inherited the file from the Liberals, the Conservatives under Stephen Harper have haltingly attempted to bolster public support for an operation they see as key to security on the home front.

But the debate was over more than the fate of one mission. With casualties mounting in Afghanistan and the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan inching its way into the politi-

cal spotlight, Canadians and their leaders are, perhaps unwittingly, revisiting a question that arguably should have been settled with the release of the Liberals' 2005 International Policy Statement — namely the "proper" role of Canada, and the Canadian Forces, on the international stage.

To be sure, the debate had an electoral dimension. How else to explain the fact that a "take note" debate on the current mission was held only a month prior? By seeking cross-party support the Tories evidently wished to neutralize Afghanistan as a possible election issue. It didn't work. Foisting a snap decision on Parliament may have paradoxically turned some MPs who would otherwise support the mission (or at least remain agnostic) against it. The Bloc Québécois expressed contempt for the government's tactics, arguing that more time was needed to assess the potential risks and rewards. New Democrats argued that fighting insurgents was not an appropriate role for Canada, and called for a return to "traditional" peacekeeping.

The willingness of both parties (and of some Liberals) to repatriate Canadian Forces before 2009 could play well with voters in a snap election. Externally, however, their reluctance to give unqualified support to the mission will be noticed, and not just in allied capitals. Any unwillingness to see the Taliban kept at bay while the Karzai government rebuilds the Afghan army

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Thus despite the favourable outcome, Harper's victory was pyrrhic. The Liberals may have committed Canada to Afghanistan, but the Tories will now "own" the file. The debate will not absolve them of having to answer key questions about the feasibility of the mission. And they will be obliged to parry thrusts from opposition politicians, opinion-makers and ordinary citizens who, nostalgic for the golden age of peacekeeping, are not acquainted with (nor accepting of) the complexities of modern military operations, and who see troops in combat (alongside the hated Americans, no less) as corrosive to the nation's soul.

Another possible reason for public dissatisfaction may have less to do with the dangers of bringing stability to Afghanistan, and more with the perception that re-commitment to that country's reconstruction comes at the expense of the UN-approved peacekeeping mission to Darfur — an operation some have argued is more in line with Canada's values (more on that

later). Without explicitly calling for an end to the former so as to undertake the latter, some parliamentarians and non-governmental organizations have been quietly counselling a shift in focus. Their views coincide with polling results showing that support for the Afghan mission is soft; a slim majority which had favoured continuation after the prime minister's

morale-boosting trip to the region has morphed into a slim majority against.

Polls seldom reveal reasons behind public ambivalence toward any given policy decision. Citing the country's history of opposing totalitarianism recalls an era for which many recent immigrants have no particular interest or affinity. Opposition in Quebec to the extension of the Afghan commitment may be unique to that province, where military defeats have a particular resonance. Afghanistan's history suggests that outside effort to politically re-engineer the country can be stymied by a defiant few. Quebecers may feel that Canada's otherwise laudable efforts are another defeat in the making.

Other sources of public disquiet are less pragmatic and more ideological. Stubborn adherence to the myth that Canadian Forces do peacekeeping to the exclusion of all else remains a factor despite a decade of complex and dangerous missions to the Balkans and Africa, as well as limited participation in two wars since 1991. And those who might otherwise be willing to help rehabilitate a war-torn country simply cannot stomach the idea of cooperating with the Bush administration in Afghanistan or anywhere else.

Of even greater import is the persistent unwillingness of many

Canadians to consider, let alone cite, national interest as the prime motivator of foreign policy behaviour. Despite the rather hard-headed goals articulated in the 2004 National Security Policy and the 2005 International Policy Statement — making Canada safe from terrorism and ensuring access to the US market — values still occupy pride of place within the public mind. That any given mission — even one as dangerous as Afghanistan — may embody the values of peace, democracy and human rights may be lost on a public whose government has done a less than adequate job of stressing the mission's relevance to the physical security of Canada, or its consistency with the best traditions of Canadian foreign policy.

Action on the Darfur file would certainly uphold those traditions, but it is difficult to argue that the crisis, for all its horrors, has affected (or will affect) the physical security of Canadians. Nor is it clear that Canadian participation in a UN-authorized implementation force would be any less problematic from a political or military point of view than would an extension of the Afghan deployment. This is not an argument for shunning Africa or eschewing the UN. It is merely to point out that a country with a limited attention span and finite military resources must make hard choices about how and under what circumstances it will shoulder its fair share of the international security burden.

The scale of the carnage in western Sudan — an estimated 200,000 dead and 1-2 million displaced or in exile — truly beggars belief. Consequently, even limited television coverage has been powerful enough to induce a "do-something" syndrome among various legislators, activists and non-governmental organizations across the Western world. However, it is unclear whether there is sufficient knowledge of the dynamics of the conflict to



Canadian Forces

Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks to Canadian troops on his visit to Kandahar in March. He told them that Canada wasn't a cut-and-run country. On May 17, the House debated the Afghan mission and voted to extend it by another two years after next February.

allow Canadians to objectively assess whether such a mission can be carried off with less risk than the one in Afghanistan.

Classical UN peacekeeping missions have historically involved the insertion of a lightly armed force between two or more state parties who agree to be separated, and who exercise full control over their (uniformed) armed forces. The Darfur crisis involves the governments of Sudan and Chad, as well as three rebel groups opposing Khartoum and one particularly vicious militia, the *janjaweed*, fighting in its service. The proliferation of players in modern, complex operations makes for multiple and competing political agendas. Cease-fire agreements are consequently more

apt to come apart if only one party feels dissatisfied. And the potential for a reignition of conflict is greater due to the fact that irregular forces do not answer to a higher authority, nor do they always command the complete obedience of their rank and file. Thus Khartoum's pledge to disarm the nomadic *janjaweed* tribesmen it had originally armed promises to be extremely problematic, while the anti-government fighters may quarrel violently among themselves.

Given the structural weaknesses of the African Union force in Darfur (only 7,000 troops for an area the size of Texas) and the weak mandate handed to it (it may observe and report on crimes against the civil population but not intervene to stop them), a UN force would have to be of sufficient

size and configuration to enforce the shaky peace agreement. Holding all parties to account means more than finger-wagging from a white-painted Jeep. It means suppressing the immoderate behaviour of those who, despite the cease-fire, would visit harm on each other or on the masses of displaced and dispossessed.

Constructive questions are being asked about Afghanistan, however late in the game. How much will the mission ultimately cost? How do we measure success? What expectations should we have of Afghans? Before we plunge into Darfur, the same intellectual rigour must be applied to the strategic questions germane to that conflict. The failure to do so thus far suggests that missions with a strong

humanitarian component and operating under the flag of the UN are not sufficiently scrutinized before the call to “do something” is answered. Calling a mission “peacekeeping” is to give it a free pass from public scrutiny.

At best, Canada’s parliament has dealt with the question of the armed forces’ ability to bring value to such an effort. On May 9 the prime minister surprised the House by saying Canada may dispatch troops to help underwrite the shaky peace deal. Only a day before, Defence Minister Gordon O’Connor had responded to calls by opposition politicians and commentators for a “lead role” in Darfur by pleading poverty. With Canada so heavily engaged in Afghanistan, he said, a second substantial contribution of ground troops to another overseas hot spot would be virtually impossible.

Canadians may be forgiven for feeling perplexed. How does a military with an authorized strength of 60,000 regular force personnel and 25,000 reservists find it hard to cough up 1,000 troops for Darfur? If Canada were to switch its focus from Afghanistan to Sudan, would it really be robbing Peter to pay Paul?

In a way, yes. To put Canada’s military strength (or weakness) into perspective, consider that the armed forces are composed of trained, effective personnel, and those who are not fully trained, or who are injured or on terminal leave and awaiting discharge. These 9,000 “non-effectives” are ineligible for deployment.

Given that reservists have civilian jobs to worry about, and cannot be compelled to serve in overseas postings (although many enthusiastically volunteer), the figure of 25,000 part-timers is a lot less formidable than it seems.

Since Darfur is landlocked, Canada’s 10,000-person navy has no relevance. Nor does that part of the air force devoted to the defence of conti-

mental airspace. And well over 5,000 uniformed personnel located in and around National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa are essentially desk-bound. They comprise the human and material resource management, information management, doctrine development and other capacities that directly and indirectly support forces in the field, but are otherwise non-deployable. Ditto those assigned to the training units and the various sub-headquarters located across the country.

This leaves the army. With a paper strength of 20,000 regulars (less “non-effectives”), one would expect that it would be ready for more action. But nearly all of its nine infantry battalions — the backbone of peace support and combat operations — are below strength. Each deployment over the past decade has been a shell game in which each deployed battalion pilfers troops from another unit in order to fill out its ranks. But even this would not be a deal-breaker if it were not for the dearth of support elements (engineers, medics, logisti-

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cians) upon which deployed units rely for sustainment.

In recent years the army leadership has attempted to transfer manpower from low-demand units to high-demand ones, but this is only a partial solution. The military will have to endure serious structural shortcomings until the government’s promised recruiting and training campaign kicks into high gear a year or two from now.

Underlining all this is the fact that for every soldier deployed abroad, two more are needed to sustain his or her

efforts. If a soldier goes to Afghanistan, it is to replace one coming home, while a third is training to replace the one who just left. Thus Canada’s 2,300-strong garrison in Kandahar actually requires a total of 6,900 personnel to maintain an indefinite rotation.

Clearly, the Conservatives have inherited a capacity problem from the previous two governments. It will take years to rebuild a force suffering from a decade or more of wilful neglect. In essence, Canada is reaping the military incapacity it has sowed.

So is Canada condemned to sit on the sidelines in Darfur? Not necessarily. A UN mission will almost certainly require aircraft to move troops and supplies across its vast expanse. At last look Canada’s tactical helicopter fleet was open for business. The air force’s CH-146 Griffon chopper — a direct descendant of the Vietnam-era Huey — is not the best of machines, but it could still be employed for light transport, liaison and surveillance duties. Equipped with light armaments and electro-optical gear, a squadron of Griffons could help keep an eye out for

janjaweed militias using the cover of darkness to rape and pillage, or anyone else intent on breaking the cease-fire.

Many uncertainties remain. Those enthusiastically pushing for intervention will have noted that Osama bin Laden has labelled Western pressure on Sudan part of a “crusade against Islam” and has called on jihadists to go and fight there. Assuming Khartoum will even let a UN force with a robust mandate into its dominions, the world body has an abysmal record of managing complex peace support operations.

It provides legitimacy but precious little capacity. Only a collection of "core" military powers to anchor the mission, or the support of a competent multinational organization (i.e., NATO), will yield any hope of success.

Logistically, moving the Griffons and their support crews into theatre will be a monumental challenge given Canada's faltering airlift capability. And the sand and summer heat will take a fierce toll on both man and machine. But if the necessary support can be scraped together, air force helicopter crews should be able to cover themselves, and Canada, in glory.

In doing so they may boost Canada's self-image as an international do-gooder, promoting universal values and unencumbered by self-interest. They may also give hope to those longing to see a UN- and peace-keeping-centric security policy. Like Afghanistan, Darfur will be no cakewalk. But so long as the choppers are painted white, the mission could garner the support of what looks to be an increasingly risk-averse public.

Despite its electoral undertones, the debate of May 17 was a worthwhile exercise. It allowed MPs to distinguish between a process they

openly disdained and an outcome they quietly supported. Whether it will set a precedent, resulting in better oversight of Canada's future overseas commitments, is unclear. What is clear is that defence or foreign policy-making is not merely a matter of tabling documents in the House and expecting the public to fall in line. Self-image is at least as good an indicator of the public mood as self-interest.

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