

Behind the posturing

Canada has decided to join in war on Iraq

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Canadian Prime Jean Chrétien and his Liberal government maintain that they have yet to take any decision on Canada's participation in a US-led invasion of Iraq. This is a bare-faced lie.

Regardless of what happens at the United Nations Security Council in the coming days, Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) will join the US war against Iraq.

The Chrétien Liberals hope that the US will succeed in bullying and bribing the great powers on the UN Security Council into sanctioning war and this for two reasons. First, because they calculate UN authorization would serve as a pacific and internationalist fig-leaf for the US war drive and thus reduce antiwar sentiment. Second, because they desperately hope the dispute between the US and the principal European powers can be bridged and the system of multilateral relations that has long-served Canada's elite in offsetting US economic and geopolitical power preserved.

That the Chrétien government and the Canadian military are already irreversibly committed to participation in a war of aggression against Iraq can be readily demonstrated by a series of ministerial statements and government actions and admissions.

* The senior CAF personnel who have been working with US and British military planners on Iraqi invasion plans recently transferred from the US Central Command in Florida to Qatar, the Gulf state slotted to serve as the nerve centre for the coming US invasion.

Last month Defence Minister John McCallum conceded that CAF leaders had been excluded from some planning meetings, because of uncertainty as to whether Canada would participate in military action against Iraq. But they were invited back late last year after the Liberal government provided the US with assurances—assurances that McCallum refused to

specify—as to Canada's readiness to participate in the war.

* On orders from the government-whip, Liberal MPs joined Tuesday with their counterparts in the ultra-right-wing Canadian Alliance to defeat a motion that stipulated the House of Commons should consider supporting an attack on Iraq only if the UN Security Council sanctions military action.

Spokesmen for the governing party claimed it had opposed the motion, which was tabled by the *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois and supported by the social democrats of the New Democratic Party as well as the Conservatives, because it wanted to uphold cabinet's prerogative to order military action without House of Commons approval.

In a pre-Christmas interview Chrétien had suggested Canada would only participate in a war authorized by the UN Security Council. Since then, however, he and his ministers have repeatedly indicated that this is merely a preference and that if the "hypothetical" becomes reality and the US acts without a Security Council resolution authorizing military action, Canada will rally to the Bush administration's side. Thus Chrétien has claimed that Resolution 1441 already provides all the legal sanction needed to attack and occupy Iraq.

* Chrétien and Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham have been at pains to disassociate themselves from the French and German governments' stand that more time is needed for the inspection process, condemning their call for a tripling of the number of inspectors and their blocking of a NATO deployment in support of Turkey—from which an attack on northern Iraq is to be launched.

* A Canadian officer has been placed in charge of a multinational naval task force that is patrolling the

Persian Gulf looking for Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters fleeing Afghanistan. The task force works in close concert with a US aircraft carrier group that has been sent to the Gulf region to prepare for an imminent attack on Iraq. In fact, the CAF's Roger Girouard will report directly on the task force's work to US Admiral Barry Costello, who heads a flotilla led by the aircraft carrier USS Constellation.

* Ottawa and Washington announced last week that US President George W. Bush will pay a state visit to Canada in May. Meetings between US presidents and Canadian prime ministers have been routine since the late 1930s. But the timing of the announcement and the often frosty relations between the Bush administration and the Chrétien Liberals suggest that it is part of a series of quid pro quos as the Canadian government dots the "i"s and crosses the "t"s on its participation in a US war against Iraq.

Much of Canada's corporate media and the Official Opposition Canadian Alliance have denounced the Chrétien government for not being even more supportive of the US war drive. While Canadian Alliance leader Stephen Harper recently conceded that he now expects Canada to participate in a war against Iraq come what may, he and much of Canada's establishment continue to accuse the Liberals of allowing Britain and Australia to forge a privileged relationship with Washington at the expense of the economic and geopolitical interests of Canada's elite.

The Alliance was thus quick to condemn Wednesday's announcement that Canada will send 1,500 troops this summer to Afghanistan to participate in a UN sanctioned force that is serving to prop up the country's newly installed pro-US government. According to the Liberals' critics, the Afghan deployment will mean that Canada will have few infantry to contribute to the war on Iraq.

This may well prove false. Chrétien has frequently surprised his right-wing critics by suddenly adopting their policies—as with the mid-1990s conversion to massive social spending cuts, the Liberals' adoption of the Alliance's tax cutting program just before the last federal election, and Canada's full-scale participation in the US war on Afghanistan. Moreover, even if Canada initially sends only a small infantry force, it has other military assets that the US is known to want and that the Chrétien government clearly does intend to

deploy—special forces, warplanes and warships.

By announcing its intention to deploy large numbers of Canadian troops under the UN flag, the Liberals hope to mollify public opposition to Canada supporting and participating in a US-led war on Iraq.

This cynical maneuver is in the tradition of Canadian "peace-keeping." While the Liberals and social democrats of the NDP have long promoted the claim—that through the UN, Canada has been and can be a force for peace—Canadian peace-keeping operations have never been about peace and social justice. Rather they have been about containing conflicts that threatened NATO unity (Suez and Cyprus) or managing Cold War conflicts (as in Vietnam, where Canadian "peacekeepers" spied for the Americans).

Historian Jack Granatstein is among those in Canada's elite who believe that its peacekeeping mythology is now a barrier to reorganizing the country's military and foreign policy in a new post-Cold War world of intensifying economic and geopolitical rivalry. Yet he readily admits Canadian peacekeeping served US interests, while at the same time allowing Canada to leverage its relative small military and geopolitical power into a place at the table in great powers deliberations.

As for Chrétien, he remains convinced that the best way to mobilize support for war is by invoking the name of the UN. His hope, for the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this article, is that the Security Council ultimately sanctions the US aggression against Iraq. But if it doesn't, he calculates he will be able to win Washington's favor and ensure Canada a place in the organizing of a post-Hussein Iraq and Middle East by announcing that Canada—purportedly one of the world's pre-eminent boosters of the UN—is now convinced of the wisdom and legality of unilateral US military action.



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