

Canada to expand its armed forces to facilitate foreign interventions

Keith Jones
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Canada's minority Liberal government is pressing forward with an election campaign commitment to increase the ranks of Canada's armed forces by 5,000 and bolster the number of reservists by 3,000.

"This is an expansion of the capability of the Canadian forces, particularly in its capacity to support offshore operations," the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Chief of Staff, General Ray Henault, told a press conference Monday. Henault termed the troop increase "critical" if the Canadian military is to continue to be deployed in missions "all over the globe."

The CAF played a major role in the 1998 NATO bombing campaign against Serbia, assisted the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001-02, has led the NATO mission that is propping up the US-installed regime in Kabul, and earlier this year deployed hundreds of troops to Haiti as part of the US-led military operation that overthrew the Caribbean island country's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Nonetheless, much of the media, the Conservative opposition, and prominent corporate leaders have accused the 11 year-old Liberal government of emasculating the military and shirking Canada's obligations to the US and other allies. Canada's armed forces, they argue, must play a much bigger role in securing imperialist interests internationally if the Canadian elite's economic and geo-political interests are not to be marginalized.

In response to these criticisms as well as pressure from Washington, the Liberal government has announced a series of major new military procurements totalling more than \$7 billion, and ordered a full foreign and defence policy review.

Prime Minister Paul Martin, in particular, has been demonstrative in his support for the CAF, repeatedly visiting defence department and military installations.

Martin has emphasized that the CAF must be fundamentally reorganized and re-equipped so as to rid it of any vestiges of Cold War strategic thinking and make it a force focussed on intervening in international "hot spots." Speaking in Washington last April, before an audience comprised of the US policy elite, Martin boasted that "Canada currently ranks second among NATO nations when it comes to the percentage of troops deployed abroad in multi-national operations" and is eager to work alongside the other imperialist powers in assuring "global stability." "That is why," declared Martin, "recently, we announced major new procurement decisions to ensure our military has the equipment it needs to get the job done."

At Monday's press conference, Henault angrily dismissed claims circulated by Canwest, the publishers of the neo-conservative *National Post*, that the funds for the expansion of CAF army personnel will be found by paring allocations to the navy and airforce. "Reports that the expansion of the Canadian Forces would result in cuts to other parts of the defence program are simply false," said Henault. The CAF's Chief Officer deplored that some CAF personnel, speaking off the record, had fuelled Canwest's suspicions. "This is," affirmed Henault, "... not the standard of professionalism, discipline and ethics that we expect in this organization," but in the name of freedom of the press he ruled out an attempt to ferret out Canwest's CAF contacts.

Henault said he had a personal commitment from Defence Minister Bill Graham that the government will increase the military's budget by the estimated \$400 million per year needed to pay for the added troop strength and has every confidence that the Martin government, despite its claims of a fiscal crunch, will make good on all its procurement promises. "Our

planning efforts assume that government will make new investments in defence in conjunction with” the troop expansion, he said.

Since the June 28 federal election, the Liberal government has also moved one step closer to formally announcing Canada’s participation in the US’s missile defence program. Last month, Ottawa announced it has authorized NORAD, the Canada-US joint air defence organization, to provide the US command charged with running missile defence with satellite and radar monitoring.

In justifying the government’s decision, Graham said that if Ottawa had not agreed to NORAD playing a pivotal role to the sharing of such information with the US missile defence system the US would have set up a new air defence command structure, making NORAD “obsolete.” The top brass of the CAF and the Canadian political establishment view NORAD as essential, because it provides Canada with a special relationship to the US armed forces, including access to advanced training and weaponry, and, just as importantly, the US aeronautics and armaments industries. Mexico, the US’s other NAFTA partner, is, by contrast, not a close military ally of the US.

For similar reasons, it is all but certain the Martin government will participate in the US anti-missile defence program as a full and acknowledged partner. Prior to becoming prime minister last December, Martin expressed support for Canadian participation. He told CTV’s *Question Period* in April 2003, “I certainly don’t want to see Canada isolated from any moves that the United States might take to protect the continent....I mean if there are going to be missiles that are...going to be going off over Canadian air space whether we want it or not...I think we want to be at the table.” Martin has also repeatedly said that one of his government’s top priorities is improving relations with the US, which were strained when his predecessor, Jean Chrétien, chose at the last minute not to have the CAF join the US invasion of Iraq.

The Liberals have said that a major determinant in their decision on missile defence will be whether it is confident it won’t lead to the weaponization of space. The Bush administration has had no problem in providing such assurances, based on the system’s current construction, but the Liberals know full well that both the current US administration and Pentagon

planners have made it clear that they conceive the current missile defence program as a step toward the development of space-based military systems.

The difficulty that the government faces is that there is great popular hostility to the Bush administration, with a large majority of the Canadian public opposing the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and its pursuit of world military and geo-political hegemony.

Martin, who as finance minister imposed unprecedented cuts in public spending and then rewarded business and the well-to-do with massive tax reductions, has certainly shown himself ready to proceed ruthlessly in the implementation of the policy shifts demanded by the ruling class. But by looking like a reluctant partner in US missile defence the Liberals are, for electoral reasons, trying to keep the appearance that they and the opposition Conservatives differ sharply over military policy and Canada-US relations.

There has been considerable press speculation that the Martin government will delay formally announcing Canada’s participation in the US missile defence until after the Nov. 2 US presidential election, believing that popular illusions on both sides of the border about the Democratic Party would make it easier to sell Canadian participation in the missile defence program should John Kerry defeat Bush at the polls. Kerry, however, is committed to all the principal geo-political goals of the Bush administration, including the continuing US occupation of Iraq and the massive build-up of US military might.



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