

Canada to establish permanent military base in Persian Gulf region

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The Canadian government is in the process of establishing a long-term military base in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. According to a recent article in the *Globe and Mail*, the Canadian government is negotiating with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to gain control of a section of the Minhad Air Base, located near Dubai, for years, if not decades, to come.

Since late 2001, when the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) participated in the US invasion and conquest of Afghanistan, the Canadian military have controlled part of the Minhad facility, operating a clandestine logistical and supply base there. The CAF has dubbed its UAE base Camp Mirage.

The *Globe* report portrayed the permanent base in the UAE as necessary if the Canadian government is to fulfill its oft-repeated commitment to provide long-term military support to Afghanistan's US-installed government.

The CAF is playing a leading role in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—the 5,000-man, United Nations-mandated, NATO-led military force that is charged with defending the government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul and its immediate environs.

Troops from the CAF were for a time the largest single component of the ISAF and currently the Canadian ISAF contingent is the biggest, save that of Germany. Seven hundred Canadian soldiers are stationed in Kabul, with another 240 scheduled to arrive in Kandahar in the near future, followed by a further 1,000 troops next year. To these must be added a complement of 250 troops aboard the HMCS Winnipeg (attached to a US carrier battle group in the Persian Gulf) and 200 troops stationed at Camp Mirage.

It would be naïve, however, to believe that Canada's military, political and economic support for the Afghan regime is the only or even the principal reason that the Canadian government is seeking a permanent military base in the UAE. As some army critics of the plan cited in the *Globe* article note, Camp Mirage is four-hours flying time from Kabul.

The securing of a permanent CAF base in the UAE will mean that Canadian military forces can be rapidly deployed throughout the oil-rich Persian Gulf region—an area where the US is already embroiled in one war and which is at the center of Washington's plans to gain a strategic stranglehold over the world's oil supplies.

The Canadian navy (whose vessels in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea are routinely re-supplied from Camp Mirage) has had an almost continuous presence in the Persian Gulf since the 1991 Gulf War.

Operation Friction (1990-91), in which Canada's navy participated in the US war to "liberate Kuwait," was followed by a series of operations aimed at enforcing a punishing regime of economic sanctions against Iraq that resulted in over a million deaths:

Operations Flag (1991), Tranquility (1995), Prevention (1997), Determination (1998) and Augmentation (1999-2002). In 2001, Canada's navy further increased its presence in the Persian Gulf under Operation Apollo, a deployment ordered by the Chrétien Liberal government to assist the Bush administration in its war on terrorism.

NATO's 1999 assault on Yugoslavia and the Afghan and Iraq wars—all aggressive US-led actions to which the Canadian government lent one or another form of support—signaled the opening of a new epoch of imperialist rivalry and conflict. The US ruling elite, no longer militarily constrained by the existence of the Soviet Union, is seeking to use its enormous military superiority to offset mounting domestic social and economic crisis by securing control of critical resources and unbridled, world geo-political predominance.

The other powers—and this became readily apparent with the conflicts surrounding the current Iraq war—have been left scrambling to develop geo-political and military strategies to counteract a US that no longer abides by the system of international relations and institutions it crafted in the aftermath of World War II and is intent on re-dividing the world in the interests of US capital.

The Canadian ruling class, for its part, is determined not to be left out or behind in this great game. Over the past decade, and particularly since 2001, the right-wing and big business have been mounting an ever-more shrill campaign to promote the need to retool and reinvigorate the CAF and for Canada to play a more significant role in upholding international order. The following demand from the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, the country's most powerful business lobby group, is typical: "Canada must build on its proud tradition of peacekeeping by rebuilding a credible capacity to contribute to global security. This should include an ability to respond meaningfully and rapidly to crises anywhere in the world."

The Liberal government of Paul Martin has responded to these calls. During last year's election campaign, Martin pledged to increase Canada's troop strength by 5,000. The February 2005 budget included a \$12.8 billion plan to expand and strengthen the Canadian Armed Forces—the largest cash injection into Canada's military in a generation. Among the plan's key provision is the development of a rapid deployment force for use in international crises.

The budget announcement, it should be noted, was carefully coordinated with the Martin government's decision that Canada will not formally participate in the Bush administration's Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) program. The juxtaposition of the two announcements exemplifies the quandary faced by the minority Liberal government.

While Martin and his Liberals are eager to fulfill the ruling-class demand for a revitalized armed forces and a greater Canadian role on

the world stage, they fear the political consequences of an explicit repudiation of the Canadian nationalist myth that Canada and its military have played a unique and honorable role in world affairs, shunning war in favor of peacekeeping.

By contrast, the neo-conservative right and a vocal lobby of former CAF generals have identified the CAF's peacekeeping aura as an obstacle to preparing the military and the Canadian public for the more prominent and aggressive role they believe Canada must play on the world stage, particularly as a partner in US-led military actions. Frequently, these elements point to Australia as a country of comparable size to Canada, but which, by working closely with Washington, whether it be in the Vietnam or Iraq wars, has punched above its weight in world affairs.

Martin, upon assuming the prime ministership at the end of a protracted feud within the Liberal Party, identified mending fences with the Bush administration as a major priority. But his government is well aware that there is mass public opposition to the right-wing agenda of the Bush administration, above all to its unrestrained militarism.

Thus the Liberals have tried to finesse their efforts to remold the CAF into an instrument of a more aggressive foreign policy and their pursuit of closer cooperation with the US, by claiming that they want to expand the CAF so as to make it a more effective peacekeeper and by distancing themselves from the most provocative and reckless actions of the Bush administration.

The gesture of standing apart from Bush's BMD sustains the myth of a pacifist Canada. Yet behind the scenes, Canada is an effective participant in the BMD system, since NORAD, the joint Canadian-US aerospace command, shares information with the missile defense program.

The Canadian pacific myth was assiduously cultivated by the ruling elite, as part of a refashioning of the Canadian bourgeois national ideology in the decades after World War II. Britain's decline had put paid to the British Empire, Canada was increasingly being drawn into the economic and geo-political orbit of the US, and there was strong pressure from the working class for social welfare programs and from the Québécois for French-language rights. Canadian capitalism was held up as representing a kinder, gentler alternative to its bigger and rapacious American counterpart. This ideology also corresponded to the international strategy of the Canadian bourgeoisie, which promoted various multilateral institutions, such as NATO and the UN, as counterweights to the overbearing influence of Washington and Wall Street.

This approach has been thrown into crisis by the resurgence of a nakedly aggressive US imperialism.

This was very visible in the way the Liberal government handled the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Up to the eleventh hour there was every indication that the government of Jean Chrétien would join the US-British invasion force. Indeed, CAF personnel worked alongside US and British commanders in developing the war plans. Then, in the days immediately preceding the invasion, Chrétien pulled back from sending troops to fight alongside the Americans in Iraq.

Instead, he announced that Canadian Armed Forces personnel would relieve US troops in Afghanistan. At the same time the Liberals privately reassured Washington that any criticisms they made of the US action would be muted—from the standpoint that Canadian participation in the Iraq war was not in Canada's best interest, and that no public debate as to the war's legality would be countenanced.

Chrétien's maneuver set off a firestorm of right-wing commentary,

both within Canada and from the United States. Nonetheless, the then US Ambassador to Canada, Paul Cellucci, had to concede that the Canadian government had provided more assistance to the US in the conquest of Iraq than many members of the coalition of the willing.

The Liberal's two-faced position on the Iraq war was certainly motivated by fear of the domestic political reaction were the CAF to join the invading armies. The weeks preceding the war's outbreak had seen giant antiwar protests, including some of the largest political demonstrations in Canadian history. More generally, they were mindful of the threat posed by the US action to the system of multilateral institutions and alliances that had proved so useful to the Canadian elite during the Cold War period as a means of securing its interests in the shadow of the imperialist colossus to the south.

In short, the Canadian ruling class needed, and still continues to need, more time to redefine the domestic ideologies and the political and legal-diplomatic frameworks surrounding the projection of Canadian military power overseas.

The location of the proposed CAF base in the desert south of Dubai is reputedly being kept secret at the request of the United Arab Emirates. The UAE's rulers certainly have good reason to be sensitive about their substantial role as a host country to Western imperialist powers: they provide rent-free space to the US and Canadian militaries, and in early 2005 the UAE participated in joint military exercises with the French military.

But more fundamentally, the clumsy attempts to conceal the plans to establish a permanent CAF base in the Persian Gulf reflect an instinctive awareness on the part of the Canadian ruling class of the caution required in any redefinition of Canada's role as an imperialist power. Too explicit a repudiation of the "peacekeeping" myth and the associated progressive Canadian nationalism could seriously undermine important ideological props of the current social-political order. The corporate media fully shares this awareness: beyond two news articles in the *Globe and Mail*, the story did not appear in the other major daily newspapers, did not elicit editorial comment, and has since dropped entirely off the media radar.



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