

Canada's colonial-style, "embedded" Afghan advisors subject of bureaucratic squabble in Ottawa

Keith Jones
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According to the *Globe and Mail*, a major controversy has erupted within the Canadian government over a little-known, but politically pivotal, aspect of Canada's intervention in Afghanistan—the Strategic Advisory Team, or SAT.

Under the SAT program, Canadian officials, almost all of them military officers, are serving as high-level policy advisors to the US-installed Afghan government. In the words of Canada's Department of Defence, "the teams are embedded in their partner Afghan Government ministries and agencies." Some of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) advisors are seconded to the office of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

The SAT program was set up at the initiative of CAF Chief of Staff John Hillier, with the support of the then Liberal government, in August 2005, as the CAF was greatly expanding its presence in Afghanistan and taking a leading role in the counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan. The program continues to be administered, and almost entirely staffed, by the CAF and the Department of Defence. (See The "Canadian Ministers" of Hamid Karzai's Afghan government.)

Currently, Canada has more than 2,500 troops, supported by Leopard tanks, in Afghanistan, and the Conservative government is pushing for the CAF's Kandahar-based counter-insurgency mission to be extended by a further two years to February 2011.

Little has been said publicly about SAT by either the Canadian government or the corporate media. But on occasion, CAF and other government officials have boasted that through SAT Canada has secured a unique position from which to influence the Afghan government. "No other country is as strategically placed as Canada with respect to influencing Afghanistan's development," said Lieutenant-Commander and SAT member Rob Ferguson.

In an article published last Monday and titled "Top Kabul team at risk of shutdown," *Globe and Mail* columnist Christie Blatchford, described the 20-or-so-member Strategic Advisory Team as "Canada's smallest and arguably most influential group in Afghanistan."

CAF head Hillier has said his aim in pushing for the creation of SAT was to ensure that the Canadian government gains real power in Kabul as a result of the Afghan intervention. CAF deployments overseas, Hillier told *Jane's Defence Weekly* in a 2006 interview, need to be sufficiently large and robust as to give "us the opportunity to get leadership appointments and to influence and

shape regions and populations in accordance with our interests and in accordance with our values."

Afghanistan's beleaguered puppet government is reportedly eager for the program to continue. No doubt this is because it is anxious for Ottawa and the CAF to press forward, in the face of a well of public opposition, with the extension of the CAF mission in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban insurgency is centered. A second consideration may be that a strong Canadian presence at the center of power in Kabul allows the Karzai regime, to lessen, even if only marginally, its dependence on Washington.

The SAT program, however, has sparked a major jurisdictional dispute within the Canadian government. According to the *Globe*, the Foreign Affairs Department is insisting that it, not the military, should run any such program and that Canada's ambassador in Kabul should be in charge of all political dealings with the Afghan government.

The Foreign Affairs Department, supported by retired foreign policy experts like Canada's former UN ambassador Paul Heinbecker, is pressing for the government to discontinue the CAF-run SAT at the end of this year.

Blatchford—who has churned out numerous articles expressing her admiration for men in uniform, be they police or soldiers—cites a retired military officer and two former civilian government officials previously involved with SAT to argue that the dispute over the program is rooted entirely in bureaucratic jealousy. Handing over such a program to Foreign Affairs would, she suggests, weaken the Karzai government and thereby cut across the aims of the Canadian government in Afghanistan.

In a Tuesday, January 15, editorial, the *Globe's* editors took a different position. SAT, they said, has played a "productive role," but the time has come for civilian officials, with government and development expertise, to replace the CAF officers as Afghan government advisors.

Said the *Globe*: "The persistence of military officers in high-level advisory jobs several years on has the potential to harm the legitimacy of the Karzai government by casting them as toadies of an occupying army."

The *Globe* also warned that the advice being given by the embedded CAF officers might further discredit the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, pointing to the prolonged controversy over the CAF's Afghan "detainee policy."

The *Globe* has been an enthusiastic promoter of the intervention in Afghanistan, including its leading role in the counter-insurgency war, Canada's largest military mission since the Korean War. But it objected to the CAF's and the Conservative government's demonstrable indifference to the fate of alleged insurgents turned over by the CAF to Afghan authorities, warning that by so obtrusively contradicting the democratic rhetoric used to publicly justify Canada's support for the Karzai regime, they were undermining public support for the CAF's Afghan war.

Recent Canadian governments, especially the current Conservative government of Stephen Harper, have expanded and re-armed the CAF and sought to put paid to the notion of Canada as having as special role in world affairs as a "peacekeeper."

The Harper government has placed the CAF intervention in Afghanistan at the center of the government's foreign policy agenda and its popular image, emphasizing that military action by the CAF will be crucial to asserting Canada's interests on the global stage in the years and decades to come.

The CAF top brass, starting with Hillier himself, clearly relish the dramatically increased budgets and new-found political importance. While the Harper government has been strongly supportive of the military and Hillier personally, the CAF head has not shied away from making statements that contradict government pronouncements. In October, he made a major speech in which he openly challenged the fundamental democratic notion of the subordination of the military to the elected civilian government. Hillier told a meeting of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, he is the "champion" of the people who serve in the CAF "and in a way I serve them as much as I serve the government of Canada and you Canadians and Canada itself."

Hillier was not criticized by the government, let alone called to account by the government for this extraordinary statement. (The opposition parties, it should be noted, also failed to object to Hillier's definition of his role.)

In keeping with its turn toward a militarism and a foreign policy even more closely aligned with Washington's, the Harper government has placed less stock than previous Liberal government did in the Foreign Affairs Department. Indeed, it is an open secret in Ottawa that the Conservatives view the department as overrun by closet Liberals.

That said, it should be stressed that in so far as the dispute over the SAT is more than a mere turf war, it is a tactical disagreement, as the *Globe* itself indicated, over how to prop up and otherwise secure the predatory interests of Canada's corporate elite in Afghanistan and around the world.

All sections of the Canadian state and Canadian big business are strongly supportive of the Canadian government's support for the US-installed Karzai government, of a continued Canadian military presence in Central Asia and the Middle East, and of the need to use the CAF to advance the interests and influence of Canadian capital.

According to the *Globe*, Foreign Affairs has been urging the Harper government to commit to winding up the SAT program before a federal advisory panel on Afghanistan issues its report, because it fears that that report will laud the CAF initiative

CAF Last October, in an attempt to build support for extending the CAF counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan despite overwhelming public opposition, Harper appointed a "wise persons" panel to make recommendations about Canada's role in Afghanistan. The panel is headed by former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister John Manley, a strong supporter of the CAF mission in Afghanistan.

In an attempt to curry favor with the electorate, the Official Opposition Liberals have announced they they oppose extending the current Canadian deployment in southern Afghanistan beyond February 2009, but they do favor a continued role for the CAF in training Afghan troops and police and, if anything, an expanded NATO war in the region.

Last Wednesday, Liberal Party leader Stephane Dion suggested that NATO forces, including presumably Canadian troops, should seriously consider entering and mounting offensive military operations in Pakistan.

Speaking to reporters shortly after returning from a two-day trip to Afghanistan, Dion said that NATO may soon have to enter Pakistan to root out support for the Taliban in the country's Pashtun-speaking tribal belt. "We are going to have to discuss that very actively if they [the Pakistanis] are not able to deal with it on their own.... As long as we don't solve the problem in Pakistan, I don't see how we can solve it in Afghanistan."

Dion ignored the question of Pakistan's attitude toward such a flagrant violation of its sovereignty. While Islamabad has turned a blind eye to several US bombing raids on its territory, it has repeatedly publicly proclaimed its strong opposition to any US or NATO military action in Pakistan, going so far to say such actions would be considered an invasion and resisted.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay mocked Dion's stance, noting that while he claims to oppose extending the current CAF mission in Afghanistan—a mission initiated by the previous Liberal government in which Dion served as cabinet minister—he is simultaneously calling for an expansion of the war.

Meanwhile, an opinion poll, carried out on behalf of CTV television and the *Globe and Mail*, has again demonstrated that the Canadian public is massively opposed to the CAF counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan. The poll, the findings of which were released in the middle of the past week, found that 47 percent of Canadians want the CAF mission to be immediately terminated and just 17 percent support the current CAF combat role in Afghanistan.



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