

Canada's Prime Minister inspects neocolonial occupation force in Afghanistan

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper visited the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) base in Kandahar and other CAF positions in southern Afghanistan for ten hours last Thursday.

Harper, whose Conservative government has trumpeted the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan as exemplifying a more assertive Canadian foreign policy and a revitalized Canadian military, lauded the troops assembled to greet him. However, he placed a new emphasis on the "developmental" aims of the Canadian presence in Afghanistan.

This shift is a transparent attempt to repackage an unpopular war and under conditions where Canadian troops will be embroiled in a summer of intense fighting—will be killing more Afghans and, in all likelihood, suffering significant further casualties.

Harper undertook his surprise visit to Kandahar as the first waves of the 21,000 additional troops US President Barack Obama's has committed to Afghanistan (17,000 combat troops and 4,000 military trainers) are arriving in the impoverished Central Asian country.

Harper travelled from the CAF's Kandahar Air Base to the Dahla dam in the Arghandab River valley, the site of what has been touted as Canada's "signature" Afghan reconstruction project.

"We're in the process of transforming our mission so it will focus on reconstruction and development," Canada's prime minister told an audience of military personnel and journalists. "Once completed, the Dahla dam project will provide drinking water to much of the Kandahar region. This project will boost agriculture, and generate 10,000 seasonal jobs and it will build people's confidence in the future."

Harper neglected to mention that the reconstruction of the Dahla Dam—a \$50 million contract paid out of Canada's foreign aid to Afghanistan—is being carried out by SNC-Lavalin, Canada's largest engineering firm. Prior to landing the Dahla Dam contract, the company was already doing logistics work for the Canadian military in Afghanistan. First proposed by the bipartisan task force on the future of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan headed by former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, the undertaking of a "signature" aid project has proven to be a convenient opportunity to provide significant "aid" to Canadian big business.

Using the dam as a backdrop, Harper asserted that "...the men and women of the Canadian forces and our civilian officials have

served courageously and selflessly to help the people of Afghanistan build a better future... Over the course of this mission our men and women in Afghanistan have made incredible sacrifices to defend our values and our interests."

When Harper speaks of "our values and our interests" he means those of Canada's ruling class, which has seized on the Afghan War as a means of asserting its ambition to be a "player" in world affairs and of strengthening its longstanding geopolitical partnership with Washington. This was bluntly asserted in the report of the Manley task force. "[T]he importance of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan," argued the report, "has earned Canadians considerable influence among the countries cooperating in Afghanistan's progress."

In addition to advancing its ambitions for a greater role in world affairs, Canada's government, first under the Liberals and then even more openly and crassly under the Conservatives, has used the Afghan war to put paid to the Canadian nationalist myth that the CAF is a "peacekeeping" force. As geopolitical tensions mount around the world, Canada's ruling elite wants to acclimatize the population to the bloody costs of imperialist war.

The CAF Chief of Staff General Walter Natynczyk accompanied Harper on his visit, even joining him in serving coffee and donuts to soldiers at the Tim Horton's that has been set up on the CAF's Kandahar base.

Natynczyk welcomed the coming surge in US troop levels: "There has not been sufficient forces on the ground to do this job... Afghanistan is a huge country, it is about the size of Manitoba, and we've been trying to do this job with about 40,000 troops. That is totally insufficient."

Belying Harper's verbal "transformation" of Canada's military mission into one focussing on development, Natynczyk admitted that the US troop surge will lead to a dramatic increase in violence and casualties. "When you bring in a lot more forces with the purpose of interdicting the Taliban roots coming in [and] out of the country, and you block that, there will be activity," Natynczyk warned. "There will be violence in those areas."

The Canadian Forces currently have 2,800 soldiers stationed in Kandahar province, supported by Leopard tanks and Griffon helicopter gunships. The arrival of a brigade of American troops will shrink by half the area under Canadian responsibility. Just last week, Canadian soldiers and their charges in the Afghan military were forced to retreat from their position in the village of Mushan,

40 kilometres west of Kandahar Air Base. The village, and the expanse of poppy fields in the surrounding area, are now under Taliban control. Since last year, two other positions in Panjwair area west of Kandahar have been abandoned, with the military forces of NATO and its puppet government in Kabul pushed back towards the air base.

So far, 118 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.

According to the most recent opinion poll, four out of every ten Canadians want the troops withdrawn before the nominal end of the combat mission in late 2011. Only 8 percent want a Canadian military presence in Afghanistan past that date.

The strong popular opposition to the CAF mission is all the more striking given the strong support for the war from the corporate media and the two major parties of the Canadian ruling class and the social-democratic NDP's abandonment of its antiwar stance.

The NDP supported the CAF deployment to Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent decision for Canada's armed forces to take a leading role in the counterinsurgency war in southern Afghanistan beginning in 2005. But as public opposition to the war and more generally the aggressive policy of the Bush administration mounted, the NDP reversed course in August 2006 and called for an immediate end to the CAF combat mission.

Seeking to curry favour with the Canadian establishment, the NDP made little mention of its opposition to the Afghan war in the 2008 federal election campaign. Then late last year, as part of its unsuccessful bid to replace the Conservatives with a Liberal-led coalition government, the NDP agreed to serve in a government committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

NDP leader Jack Layton followed this up by issuing an open letter to Obama in which he praised the US President's decision to mount a strategic review of the Afghan War, although it was clear from the outset, given Obama's public declarations during and after the presidential campaign, that the review was aimed at intensifying the war by deploying more troops to Afghanistan and expanding the war into Pakistan.

In March, Layton published an op-ed piece in the *National Post* titled "Canada's next steps in Afghanistan," which took as a given that the CAF combat mission will continue through 2011 and endorsed the claim of Canada's ruling elite that Ottawa ought to play a major role in shaping Afghanistan's government. Echoing Harper's claims that Canada has intervened in Afghanistan for altruistic purposes, Layton declares, "Our skills and reputation as a peacemaker give Canada the basis for an active role after our troops are withdrawn in 2011. We must begin laying the foundations for that diplomatic role now."

Layton's position is not that far removed from Harper's or, for that matter, Michael Ignatieff's Liberals.

"We're moving," said Harper last week in Afghanistan, "to a mission with better-defined civilian objectives... that is where the future of this mission is going."

A telling indication of these "civilian objectives" has been the establishment of the Canadian Governance Support Office (CGSO), an organisation of political advisors embedded in the various ministries of Hamid Karzai's Afghan government. Organised through Canada's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and centred upon the Canadian Embassy in Kabul, the CGSO has

advisors in eight departments of the Afghan government, including the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of the Interior. In the latter, a former head of the Canadian Police College has been charged with developing an "Afghan-led" unit to determine the Ministry's policy.

CGSO last year replaced the controversial Strategic Advisory Team (SAT), a secretive group of military advisors working within the Afghan government. SAT was a personal project of former Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier (see: "The "Canadian Ministers" of Hamid Karzai's Afghan government"). Like SAT, CGSO is responsible not to the Afghani people, nor even to NATO, but directly to the Canadian state, and serves as a means for Ottawa to shape Afghan policy in correspondence with the economic and geopolitical interests of Canadian big business.

The replacement of the military SAT by the CGSO, while giving a "diplomatic" face to the Canadian bourgeoisie's neocolonial interference in the affairs of the Afghani state, provoked dissension and bitterness among the Canadian Forces' high command.

Retired Brigadier-General Serge Labbé, the last commander of the SAT, lamented its loss, saying: "It is not so much what we did but how we did it. That was the difference between us and everyone else in the country. The CGSO has individuals assigned to a ministry rather than members of a team assigned to a ministry which, from my perspective, is better." Labbé proclaimed SAT—that is the seconding of Canadian military officers to serve as political overlords in country's where the CAF has been deployed—"a visionary concept." "Ten years from now," he predicted, "there will be [other] SATs and perhaps sooner than that."



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