

Canada to extend participation in Afghan War through 2014

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper confirmed Thursday that his Conservative government has decided to extend the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) participation in the Afghan War for a further three years through 2014.

Harper did not provide details beyond saying that Canadian troops will train Afghan soldiers in counter-insurgency warfare.

However, his aides have let it be known that the CAF deployment will likely be about a thousand strong—750 trainers and a couple of hundred support staff.

A recent poll showed 85 percent of Canadians want all CAF personnel to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2011, when its current combat mission is slated to end, if not earlier.

Because of the popular opposition to the CAF waging war on behalf of Afghanistan's corrupt, repressive US-imposed government, the minority Conservative government is trying to cast the new CAF deployment as radically different, as a training rather than a combat mission.

The government's hope is that by largely removing the CAF from the battlefield, Canadian casualties can be sharply curtailed, and the edge taken off domestic opposition to the war. In Afghanistan 152 CAF personnel have been killed—in per capita terms one of the highest death tolls among the US-led occupation forces.

"The most important thing to emphasize," said Harper, "is that the combat mission will end. I know there are others in NATO who would like us to continue the combat mission. I've been very clear. That's not an option Canada will consider."

The reality is that the CAF will continue to play a major role in the waging of a neo-colonial war—a war motivated by the US's drive to establish a strategic beachhead in Central Asia, a region rich in oil, natural gas and mineral resources that borders three key US rivals, Russia, Iran, and China.

The CAF, drawing on the counter-insurgency experience it has gained from six years in the heat of battle in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold, will train Afghan troops to kill Afghans opposed to the foreign occupation. Canadian officials are presently denying it, but such training could well evolve battlefield "mentoring," that is leading Afghan troops in combat. *The Globe and Mail* has reported that the US military is already pressing for the new CAF training mission to include "mentoring."

Currently, Canada has 2900 troops in Afghanistan, virtually all of them

in Kandahar City and its environs. Two hundred of these are involved in battlefield mentoring.

Prior to last Sunday, when Defence Minister Peter MacKay revealed that the government was considering ordering the CAF to undertake the counter-insurgency training mission, Harper and his Conservatives had long-insisted that the CAF deployment to Afghanistan, now entering its eleventh year, would end in 2011.

This week's about-face is meant to give the Obama administration a boost in the run-up to a major NATO conference in Lisbon next week. Washington is anxious to use the conference to counter the perception that its Afghan "surge" has failed to deliver a body blow to the insurgency and to demonstrate that it and its allies are resolved to stay the course.

According to press reports, Washington is hoping the Canadian reversal will help it persuade Holland, which recently withdrew all its troops from Afghanistan, to join Canada in supplying military trainers.

Undoubtedly Washington and NATO brought pressure to bear on Ottawa to make a strong show of support for the war. It has been noted on both sides of the border that the US did little if anything to support Canada's recent failed bid for a two-year seat on the United Nations Security Council.

In his remarks Thursday, Harper appeared to be a reluctant convert to the need for a continued CAF presence in Afghanistan. "Look," said the Conservative prime minister, "I'm not going to kid you. Down deep, my preference would be, would have been, to see a complete end to the military mission. But as we approach that date, the facts on the ground convince me that the Afghan military needs further training. I don't want to risk the gains that Canadian soldiers have fought for and that they have sacrificed in such significant numbers for by pulling out too early ... So I do this with some reluctance but I think it is the best decision when one looks at the options."

Harper's reticence—in so far as it was not contrived—was entirely due to his fear of an angry popular reaction under conditions where his government, despite strong support from the corporate media, has been unable to secure a parliamentary majority.

It was the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin that made Canada a party to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, then in 2005 gave the CAF a leading role in the counter-insurgency war by deploying it to Kandahar. Yet no sooner had Harper and his Conservatives arrived in office in February 2006 than they moved aggressively to place their stamp on the war.

Harper repeatedly pointed to the CAF intervention in Afghanistan as proof that under his government Canada has a more robust foreign policy and will not shy away from using the military to assert Canadian interests and “values” on the world stage.

And he placed the CAF at the center of a government-led campaign to develop a more right-wing, assertive and openly militaristic Canadian nationalism.

In 2006 and again in 2008, Harper sought and secured the House of Commons’ approval for extensions of the CAF counter-insurgency mission, successfully appealing to the Liberals, the official opposition and the Canadian elite’s other traditional governing party to uphold the “national interest,” by providing him the necessary votes.

In May 2008 the Conservatives—continuing a military build-up initiated under the Martin Liberal regime—laid out plans to significantly increase the size and firepower of the armed forces under their Canada First Defence Strategy.

This summer the government decided to forego the normal tender process to order 65 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters at a cost of \$16 billion (including long-term maintenance). By purchasing the US-made fighter, the Canadian government is ensuring continued interoperability with US forces and that the CAF has the capacity to make a major contribution in the air in foreign wars—as it did in the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia.

This week’s reversal is thus entirely in keeping with the actions and aims of the Harper government. And it may well prove to be only a first step. With significant numbers of CAF personnel remaining in Afghanistan post-2011, it will be both logistically and politically easier for the government to order the CAF to resume combat operations in Afghanistan.

The Liberals—led by Michael Ignatieff, like Harper a vocal supporter of the Iraq War—have been urging the government since last June to give a positive answer to the US’s and NATO’s appeals for the CAF to take a leading role in Afghan military training post-2011.

On Friday the government and the Liberals agreed that unlike in 2006 and 2008 there will be not be a House of Commons’ vote to authorize the post-2011 CAF deployment to Afghanistan. After Harper told reporters parliamentary authorization was not needed, this was quickly seconded by the Liberal Foreign Affairs critic Bob Rae. “Whether there’s a parliamentary resolution is not a matter of law (or even custom),” said Rae, “but a choice of the government. In the current circumstance I fully understand the government’s decision.”

By not having a parliamentary vote, the government is seeking to emphasize the purported difference between the current “combat mission” and the role the CAF is to play in Afghanistan post-2011.

Both parties are also eager to avoid joining forces to pass a resolution on Afghanistan, since such a vote would draw attention to the extent to which they uphold the same big business interests and pursue like policies, on everything from the Afghan War to the need for “austerity,” that is cuts in public spending.

The trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) is opposing the new CAF mission, but has repeatedly made clear its support for Ottawa providing other forms of assistance to the US-imposed government of Hamid Karzai. Canada’s social democrats whole-heartedly

supported Canada’s participation in the Afghan war, including the CAF’s assumption of a leading role in the counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan, for the war’s first five years. Subsequently, they came out in favor of an orderly Canadian withdrawal—i.e. one that didn’t disrupt NATO operations. But in the 2008 elections they joined the other parties in effectively excluding the war as an election issue and less than two months later announced their readiness to join a Liberal-led coalition government committed to waging the Afghan war.

As it became apparent this past week that the Conservatives were about to prolong the CAF’s participation in the Afghan War, Bloc Québécois (BQ) leader Gilles Duceppe refused to take a position. Opposition to the war and the Harper government is especially strong in Quebec, but the BQ fully supported the CAF’s participation in the war through 2009. Indeed, Duceppe repeatedly denounced the NDP’s pullout call as “irresponsible.” During a trip last month to Washington to meet with US State Department officials and congressmen, Duceppe reiterated that an independent Quebec would have joined the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The decision of the Harper government to extend the CAF’s participation in the Afghan War has been almost uniformly applauded by Canada’s corporate media.

At the end of last month, the country’s most influential newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, ran an extensive series of articles, stretching over a week and with two or more pages of coverage per day, on the future of the Canadian Armed Forces. The series was designed, as was said bluntly in the first paragraph of the initial article, to oppose a strong public mood in favor of pulling back from overseas military interventions since the Afghan War “has not gone as we had hoped.” The central argument of the series was that as the result of the Afghan War, Canada now has a battle-tested military and this precious asset must be used under conditions where the world is full of failed states and climate-change is making the Arctic a subject of global interest and competition.

“After Afghanistan, the world will need Canada’s military more than ever,” declared the *Globe*. “Years of combat during the Afghan mission have forged the Canadian Forces into a mobile, technologically advanced middle power that will be crucial to fighting the new face of war around the world.”

In the event that Canada shies away from waging wars to uphold global order, the *Globe* warned the country’s financial and political elite, “it will pay a price, in lost influence in the world, and to our interests in a rules-based international-order.”

In a front-page comment titled “Using our military muscle, the *Globe*’s usually restrained editors, declared, “Canada’s interests are global. Let us take full advantage of our military strength—and, quite literally, choose our battles.”

While the Obama administration may have prodded the Harper government into extending the CAF’s participation in the Afghan War yet again, the sentiments voiced by the *Globe* underscore that in partnering with Washington the Canadian government and bourgeoisie are pursuing their own predatory agenda.



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