

Escalation of Afghanistan War: Canada Faces a Fateful Decision

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

The United States and its imperialist partners are losing their war of conquest in Afghanistan and a further escalation is required. Canada's Conservative Party government now faces the thorny problem of bringing its policy into line with U.S. plans.

General Stanley McChrystal, the head of the U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan, says more troops are needed if the invading forces are to prevail, so he is asking President Barak Obama for an additional 40,000 soldiers. Currently, there are 64,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan plus several tens of thousands of other foreign soldiers and mercenaries.

McChrystal's blunt assessment of the war was delivered in a series of extraordinary public pronouncements in early October designed to pressure the President into a sharp and rapid troop increase. Obama is purported to be weighing the matter, but the U.S. troop presence is already up 20,000 since his election one year ago. The October 13 Guardian newspaper (UK) reports that as many as 13,000 unannounced, additional troops are quietly on the way.

There seems little doubt that Obama has already agreed to a version of what his military leaders want. His closest European ally in the war, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, has agreed to boost British troop numbers and is stumping across Europe for 5,000 more troops from other NATO countries.

Australia and Spain are boosting their troop numbers, while the recently re-elected chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, is staunchly defending her country's continued role, despite rising opposition by the German people.

Canada caught out

At the Conservatives' behest, Parliament voted in March 2008 to end Canada's military role in Afghanistan in 2011. Following the federal election campaign of autumn 2008, the re-elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper vowed that there would be no further extension beyond that date

This was a stalling tactic to deflect rising domestic opposition to the war and to give time for the Conservatives to score a majority government in the succeeding election. But events are moving rapidly and the fudging over 2011 cannot be sustained indefinitely.

So the government is slowly beginning to back peddle. For one, it is voicing support for the McChrystal/Obama drive to expand the war. For another, Minister of Defence Peter Mackay told a Parliamentary committee last month that Canada would find a way to maintain its military presence by "shifting" its resources towards "development and reconstruction." He

repeated that message while in Afghanistan on November 14.

A destructive war

The war is going terribly wrong for Ottawa by any measure. Thousands of Afghans have died or suffered injury. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have been displaced, forced into exile and otherwise lost their livelihoods. The International Committee of the Red Cross says that violence has reached “stunning and dramatic levels.”

Afghan resistance fighters control more territory than ever, and there are few areas where foreign troops are safe from attack. During the last four months, monthly death rates for foreign soldiers are higher than at any other time since the U.S. invaded the country in 2001. Fifty-five U.S. soldiers were killed in October, the highest monthly number ever.

The war is also spilling over into Pakistan, causing untold mayhem and violence. Bombings and missile attacks by U.S. drone (pilotless) aircraft are provoking popular outrage, to the point where even the quasi-military Pakistan government has criticized their use.

The presidential election that took place in Afghanistan in August was intended to provide a democratic façade to the foreign-controlled government in Kabul under Hamid Karzai. But it was a complete fiasco. Karzai and his supporters committed massive fraud. With hundreds of thousands of tainted ballots nullified, Karzai failed to carry the first-round ballot with the required absolute majority. On November 1, his main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew from the second round vote, saying a fair election was impossible.

Nonetheless, the stakes in the war remain the same for the U.S. and its allies – securing Afghanistan as a reliable transit route for Central Asian oil and gas, and establishing a permanent and geographically proximate threat to competing regional powers, including Russia, China and Iran.

Canada's quagmire

Canada's war effort has stumbled from one setback to another. Popular fatigue, if not outright opposition, is deepening at home. A steady stream of news reports question the false claims of the war's backers that Canada is lending a “humanitarian hand” to the Afghan people.

Rangina Hamidi, daughter of the mayor of Kandahar, told [CBC Radio One's The Current on September 28](#) that she was not aware of any Canadian-financed development projects in or around Kandahar City.

Hatred of the foreign occupiers is deepening as a result of indiscriminate killings of civilians. Hundreds have died from aerial bombardments; others from routine encounters. The latest killings by Canadians occurred on October 3, south of Kandahar, when soldiers killed two boys, 14 and 16 years old.

Other practices, too, are provoking outrage, including forced, night-time entry into homes in the pursuit of suspected resistance fighters, and the use of torture.

Canada's role in assisting Afghan authorities with torture exploded into the news in early 2007. The government was obliged to convene an inquiry into the practice by the Military

Police Complaints Commission. But the government has successfully stalled that inquiry and is taking legal action to restrict its scope, should it ever get under way. The military's top lawyer, Brigadier-General Ken Watkins, recently refused to testify before it.

Kandahar resident Gul Mohammed told the *Globe and Mail* in September, "We have good memories from Canadians and we have bad memories." In some places, he said, Canadians "killed the common people by bombardment and by attacks when they could not tell who was a Taliban."

Writing in support of a "new, counterinsurgency" strategy for Afghanistan, retired Major General and former chief of planning and operations of the Canadian Armed Forces, Terry Liston, inadvertently gave a damning summary of the foreign presence in Afghanistan in a November 11 op-ed article in the *Vancouver Sun*.

"The surgical air strikes and targeted assassinations, gently called 'counter-terrorism,' fail to suppress the hard-core enemy but cause enough death and destruction to incite an apathetic population to rise up angrily in its own defence.... Consequently, the Taliban are expanding exponentially..."

The array of special laws in Canada that accompany the Afghan war and broader "war on terrorism" have come under serious attack at home. Lengthy, costly, but ultimately successful proceedings by some of the victims of these laws have been won. The case of Maher Arar is a case in point – it exposed the participation of Canada's federal police agencies in international torture rendition. Arar won a civil suit and financial compensation for the suffering he endured while illegally imprisoned in Syria.

More recent cases have exposed the federal government's refusal to protect the rights of citizens traveling abroad.

A centrepiece of the assault on democratic rights has been the use of "security certificates" that allow for the detention of non-citizens without due process and date from prior to the 1991 Iraq war. On October 14, the Federal Court of Canada dealt a serious blow to this procedure when it refused to allow further stalling by Canada's spy agency in dealing with the five cases that remain active. It removed all remaining bail conditions on one of the victims, Adil Charkaoui. There have been no new security certificates issued for years.

'Counter-insurgency' means war without end

A November 4 article by the *Globe and Mail's* correspondent in Afghanistan, Gloria Galloway, sheds some light on the scope of the military build-up that is envisioned by Washington and supported by Canada. She writes,

"An uncomfortable awakening has occurred among coalition forces in Afghanistan.... Coalition countries, including Canada, have indicated a willingness to follow U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, the head of the International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan, as he changes the strategy from a classic 'stability operation' to one of counterinsurgency."

This new "strategy" was approved by NATO defence ministers when they met in late

October in Slovakia, Galloway writes. She cites NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "Ministers agree that it does not solve the problems in Afghanistan just to hunt down and kill individual terrorists. What we need is a much broader strategy which stabilizes the whole Afghan society."

Galloway explains, "A counterinsurgency demands huge numbers of troops to secure an area and stay until the population can fend for itself."

Post-2011 in Afghanistan?

A host of obstacles confront the Conservative and Liberal parties as they look ahead to post-2011 in Afghanistan. Growing public weariness, if not opposition, is one. Scott Taylor, an ex-serviceman and editor of *Esprit de Corps*, a publication aimed at soldiers, writes a weekly column in the Halifax Chronicle Herald; his September 21 column was headlined ["Only a Village Idiot Can Remain Hopeful in Afghanistan."](#)

The *Globe and Mail's* Margaret Wente wrote on September 17, "Iraq was the product of neo-con delusions. Afghanistan is in many ways the product of liberal delusions."

Serious questions have arisen over the toll that the war is taking on Canada's military. It has lost 133 soldiers to date, the highest number of deaths, proportionately, of all the occupation forces. Retired Major-General Lewis Mackenzie wrote last December that there is no chance Canada could keep a force of combat soldiers there. "Parts of the army are broken ... they're having a bitch of a time putting together a battle group (1,000 soldiers) now, let alone a couple of years from now."

On November 9, Chief of the Defence Staff Gen. Walt Natynczyk contradicted recent government fudging by declaring he is beginning to plan the complete withdrawal of Canadian soldiers by July. It's not clear whether his declaration signals alarm over the toll that the war is taking on Canadian forces or is a pressure tactic on the government to abandon the 2011 end date.

An antiwar movement

According to a poll sponsored by the CBC and published in September, opposition in Canada to the war in Afghanistan is higher than at any time since 2002. Fifty-six per cent of respondents were "strongly opposed" or "somewhat opposed." Only 41 per cent expressed support.

Herein lies a paradox of politics in many of the invading countries in the Afghan war, including in the United States itself. The war is more unpopular than ever, yet numbers at antiwar protests have stagnated or grown smaller. (An important exception took place in London, England on October 24 when as many as 10,000 people marched against the war and its escalation.)

A key explanation for the paradox in Canada is the softening of antiwar politics by the social-democratic New Democratic Party and many of its trade union affiliates. The NDP has always fudged its opposition to the war, couching it in terms of replacing Canada's military role with a "development" role. Last year, for a time, it abandoned entirely its call for an end to Canada's "combat role" in Afghanistan when the prospect of replacing the Conservative government with a coalition government of the NDP and Liberal Party arose. The Liberals took Canada into the war in 2001 and deepened that course in 2005.

The coalition moment passed when the Liberals turned their back on it, but the NDP leadership has remained largely mute on Afghanistan, in the vain hope that it will play a role in a future Liberal-led minority government.

Opponents of the war in Canada have an exceptional opportunity in the coming weeks to take an antiwar message far and wide. Afghan Member of Parliament, antiwar spokesperson and champion of Afghan womens' rights, Malalai Joya, will speak in [seven cities across Canada in November](#). She has just published a memoir of her life, *A Woman Among Warlords*, co-authored with Canadian antiwar activist Derrick O'Keefe.

In a recent interview, Joya explained:

"The people of Afghanistan do not want more troops...

"First of all, it is the right of my people to say that. Secondly, we believe that no nation can bring liberation in another nation. Today's situation, this eight-year disaster, is a good example of what war and occupation does.

"People say that if the U.S. withdraws, there will be a civil war. My message to people who say that is that there already is a civil war, and as long as these troops are in Afghanistan, the longer the civil war will be."

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