

Canada's once-lofty Afghan goals downgraded, defence files show

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OTTAWA — Just 17 months ago, Canada's war planners had far more ambitious goals in mind for Afghanistan, an internal document from National Defence shows, including significantly reducing the capability of Taliban insurgents and substantially cutting poppy growing and drug trafficking.

Today, Ottawa's published goals are more modest. For instance, the Harper government's June release of refocused goals for Afghanistan sets no targets for the strength of insurgents - who are making a comeback in 2008 - or combatting drugs.

Critics say the contrast shows how much the Harper government has ratcheted down ambitions for Afghanistan, lowering expectations so that it can't be accused of failure when Canada withdraws from Kandahar in 2011.

The 2007 goals are in a directive from former chief of the defence staff Rick Hillier's office - labelled "secret" - that was released under the Access to Information Act.

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The Feb. 16, 2007, memo says "Canada's whole-of-government strategy ... is focused on an end state" that includes these goals:

"Taliban and al-Qaeda capabilities have been dramatically reduced."

"Narcotics cultivation and trafficking have been substantially reduced."

Last month, however, the Harper government laid out public, three-year goals.

The government was starting to plan for a combat pullout in 2011 from Kandahar, the Afghan province under Canada's responsibility.

The revamped strategy contains no mention of targets for ratcheting back Taliban strength or reducing the illegal drug industry in Kandahar.

Those problems have only grown worse since the earlier strategy was written. Afghanistan's opium crop has increased every year for the past six years, UN estimates say. Available data also show deteriorating security in Afghanistan, including Kandahar, in recent years. Figures compiled by Sami Kovanen, a respected security consultant at Vigilant Strategic Services Afghanistan, show this year's total insurgent attacks as of July 20 are greater in Kandahar than any other province.

Now, a key focus of the Harper government's strategy in Kandahar is turning over responsibilities for maintaining order and fighting insurgents to local army and police. The Tories said in their June statement of priorities that they plan to "maintain a more secure environment and establish law and order by building the capacity of the Afghan National Army and Police."

NDP defence critic Dawn Black said Ottawa has lowered the bar for Afghanistan because it cannot accomplish what it originally planned. "They're setting the markers lower so they can say they achieved some of their objectives," Ms. Black said.

A Conservative government spokeswoman said a lot of time has passed since the chief of the defence staff's 2007 directive, but she rejected the suggestion that Canada's goals have shrunk. "This is an assessment from the Department of National Defence from February, 2007. It is now July, 2008," said Anne Howland, spokeswoman for Foreign Affairs Minister David Emerson.

She said the current direction in Afghanistan was influenced by the Manley report on Canada's future role there, as well as the March, 2008, vote in Parliament to extend the mission and refocus it. MPs voted at the time to put more emphasis on development.

"These overall goals are not more modest - but concentrated on areas in which we can make the most impact until our military mission ends in 2011," Ms. Howland said.

Retired colonel Alain Pellerin of the Conference of Defence Associations said it's tough to persuade poppy farmers in Kandahar - Taliban territory - to grow alternate crops. "The drug lords and the Taliban at night would go to the farmer and say, 'Listen, either you grow opium for us or we will chop off your head.' "

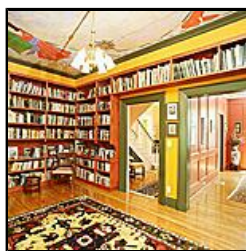
He said it's proven better to hold off on this for now and instead focus on building things that could help commerce, such as roads - efforts that employ local Afghans.

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