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An Afghan mirage

Canadian troops will not be leaving Afghanistan in 2011

By **MICHAEL DEN TANDT**

Canadian troops will not be leaving Afghanistan, as promised by the prime minister during the last election campaign, in 2011. Our combat losses, which now stand at 108 soldiers, one diplomat and two aid workers, will continue to mount after that date.

Anyone who tells you different is, if not flat-out lying, then certainly "massaging" the truth with misconceptions, misdirection and half-truths.

The federal Conservatives, the Liberal party and the Defence Department brass in Ottawa all have good reasons for maintaining the charade of a fixed "end date" to the mission. And the media? We've gotten very good at reporting what people tell us.

Here's what Prime Minister Stephen Harper said last September: "We're planning our withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan in 2011. At that point, the mission ... as we've known it, we intend to end it."

That is, the "combat" mission will end. What combat mission? The one we heard about ad nauseam from the Liberals, of course, during the two-year period (2006-07) when they turned their back on the deployment they themselves had launched, by casting it as Harper's war?

In fact, there never was a "combat mission" per se. The Afghan mission didn't change under the Conservatives. It continued as conceived by Liberal defence minister Bill Graham and now retired chief of defence staff Rick Hillier: A humanitarian mission, backed up and defended by a robust combat capability.

MORE SMOKE

Last year, when the Liberal party pledged its renewed support, we heard a great deal more about an end to combat, more reconstruction and so on. That, too, was smoke.

That's because the focus has always been on reconstruction. True, there is and has been, since February 2006, a significant combat component, charged with disrupting or killing insurgents before they disrupt and kill our soldiers or their Afghan and NATO allies.

But the strategic purpose of the combat component is protective, not offensive. Canada's small military contingent, now about 2,700, is not trying to achieve a military victory. It is there to help the Afghans develop their own security and civic institutions, until such time as they can manage those tasks on their own.

What is almost certain to happen, after 2011, is that Canadian soldiers remain in Kandahar in significant numbers, but with most force protection being taken on by the Americans. Defence analysts now project a post-2011 Canadian contingent of about 1,000. The PRT base in Kandahar City, the leading edge of Canada's humanitarian efforts, will likely stay under Canadian control.

Will there be continuing casualties? Yes. The most potent insurgent weapon is the improvised explosive device, or IED. The Taliban use those against NATO vehicles travelling anywhere in Kandahar Province -- including vehicles carrying humanitarian workers.

Canadian soldiers engaged in reconstruction post-2011 will face exactly the same risks as they face now.

Why is everyone fudging on this?

The Harper Conservatives have known all along that Canada can't simply walk away from its NATO obligations in 2011. But they also know the Afghan mission makes Canadians uneasy. Why rock the boat with unpleasant truth?

USE OF FORCE

The Liberals under Michael Ignatieff also know we can't walk away from NATO. Ignatieff is a Pearsonian. He believes in the use of force abroad to achieve humanitarian aims. He also understands that credibility in Washington requires a willingness and ability to use military force in pursuit of national aims. But saying this

publicly does him no good, across Canada.

The DND brass? They all liked and admired Hillier but none of them are him or want to be him, in terms of political impact. So they're staying out of politics and focusing on the job, which is to follow orders and make our soldiers overseas as safe and effective as possible, for as long as they're there.