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Mackenzie Analysis

Canada and Afghanistan

by **Major General (ret'd) Lewis Mackenzie** (*bio appears below*)

The war in Afghanistan is one of the few policy issues facing US President Obama where his decisions will change little if anything as significant change was already underway under the Bush administration. General David Petraeus, the new commander of US Central Command responsible for the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns was previously the commander of the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. There he was the architect of the troop "surge" and the concept of organizing and paying local tribes in the Sunni communities in Anbar province to become part of the security solution rather than the problem. Although the later was and remains controversial, the dramatic reduction in violence has given the concept some credibility.

Over the past few years it has become painfully obvious that the majority of the 26 NATO member countries were unwilling to honour their obligations under the NATO Charter to provide adequate boots on the ground to defeat the Afghan insurgents. As a result, General Petraeus was successful in convincing the Bush administration to reinforce the US troop contribution to NATO's International Security Assistance Force by some 30,000 troops over the next year. In addition, Petraeus proposed to organize local defence committees throughout Afghanistan based on the Iraq Awakening model to assist in providing security to the local populations. This proposal resulted in significant push-back from the Karzai government and a number of NATO countries including Canada.

Concerns have been raised that empowering local tribal leaders with new responsibilities, funds and resources would create a parallel security apparatus outside the control of Afghanistan's central government and give rise to an even greater number of war lords. A compromise has been reached where a few trial local defence committees will be established and the concept evaluated.

At this time of heated debate behind closed doors within NATO, Canada finds itself in an awkward position of promising a withdrawal from the military mission in Afghanistan in 2011 just as the Alliance or more accurately, our southern neighbour is in the process of doubling the size of its troop contribution. There is little doubt that the current euphoria accompanying the new US President into the office will make it more difficult for NATO leaders to say no when the inevitable requests for additional troop support are made. Commentary in Canada is already speculating that we will be asked to remain in Afghanistan in a combat role after 2011. President Obama's upcoming visit to Canada could well raise the issue.

The painful truth is that Canada will not be capable of remaining in Afghanistan in a combat role beyond 2011. Indeed, remaining in such a role until 2011 will present its own host of problems and challenges. Our military was slashed and burned during the 90's when ordered to contribute 27% of its budget towards paying down the national debt, a percentage greater than any other government department. It was impossible to immediately reduce spending by that amount except by dramatically reducing the number of its uniformed personnel. As a result Canada now has an Army that can be seated in Maple Leaf Gardens with some empty seats left over. Our Regular Infantry, which does most, but not all of the dirty work outside the wire in Afghanistan, is well over a thousand soldiers of all ranks smaller than the Toronto Police Service!

In spite of these tiny numbers, by 2011 we will have maintained a battle group (a combat unit of some 1000 soldiers) in theatre for most of nine years, just shy of World War's One and Two combined. The number of soldiers completing multiple tours in Afghanistan, some as many as four to date, combined with one year pre-tour training and temporary deployment away from home on return to Canada to train recruits awaiting instructors has broken parts of the Army. Without respite the remainder will be broken by 2011. This "best little Army in the world" needs to be rebuilt. The current combat role beyond 2011 could only be categorized as political abuse.

The above is not to suggest that there would be no Canadian military and paramilitary roles in Afghanistan post 2011. Canada could and in my estimation probably will carry on with numerous enhanced tasks. I can see our Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team and its infantry company remaining. There is a crying need for additional instructors for the understaffed NATO teams training the expanding Afghan National Army and the international police currently training the problematic Afghan National Police Force where they are currently short some three thousand (sic) instructors! In concert with expanded diplomatic, governance and development commitment the Canadian footprint in Afghanistan post 2011 could well total one thousand compared to the almost three thousand in-country today.

Bio:

During his thirty six years of military service in the Infantry, Major-General (ret'd) Lewis MacKenzie served nine years in Germany with NATO forces and managed to fit in nine peacekeeping tours of duty in six different mission areas - the Gaza Strip, Cyprus, Vietnam, Cairo, Central America and Sarajevo. In 1990 General MacKenzie was appointed commander of the United Nation's Observer mission in Central America. Two years later he was assigned to the United Nation's Protection Force in Yugoslavia. In May of that year he created and assumed command of Sector Sarajevo and with a contingent of soldiers from 31 countries opened the Sarajevo airport for the delivery of humanitarian aid during the height of the Bosnian civil war. As result he became the only Canadian, military or civilian, to be awarded a second Meritorious Service Cross. He retired from the Canadian Forces in 1993.

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