

Commentary

Not in my worst nightmares ...

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Imagine, in a close election, the Liberal Party led by Stéphane Dion regains power with a slim plurality. Within 24 hours, Chief of the Defence Staff Rick Hillier is issued new Rules of Engagement (ROE) for the Canadian Forces serving in Afghanistan. These are immediately passed to the Canadian commander in Kandahar and on to the battle group commander. The Lieutenant-Colonel tells his soldiers the ROE are effective immediately, and adds his comments:

Rule 1. You will no longer attempt to eliminate the insurgency threat to the vast majority of the local population in Kandahar province.

"That will be left to soldiers from other countries yet to be identified. You will redirect your efforts to being nice. Your commander will explain how this will be achieved."

Rule 2. You will provide security for the local population and construction projects but you will not engage in combat to do so.

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"If you served in Bosnia, you will know how to do this. If not, others will show you how to place yourself in a dangerously exposed position between the attacker and the people you are protecting. That way, the attackers will have to go through you and you will be allowed to fire at them in self-defence. Yes, it sounds ridiculous, but remember, the people who gave us this order must know something we don't.

Rule 3. There will be no more "search and destroy" missions by Canadians.

"You will note the order says no more search *and* destroy missions. That being the case, I interpret the order to permit us to conduct "search" missions on even days of the month and "destroy" missions on odd days.

To make this easy to remember in the heat of battle - sorry, I meant while *observing the enemy* ... darn, I meant *our nemesis, the Taliban* - you will receive colour-coded ammunition. "Search days" will have blue bullets, with 50 per cent of them being blanks spread randomly in your magazines. Our superiors feel this gives the Taliban a more level field on which to fight.

On "destroy days," there will be red bullets and even though you can only fire them for two hours in any 24-hour period, we will at least have some opportunities to disrupt the Taliban's strategic objective, which is to retake Kandahar city.

Rule 4. Don't count on assistance from tanks and artillery or allied air-to-ground fire if you get into difficulty.

"Those weapon systems are much too warlike and really turn off the NDP who are supporting the new government.

It's going to be hard working around this caveat, but I promise to give it some thought and get back to you.

Rule 5. You are precluded from engaging in aggressive combat operations.

"We are serving as one of 11 national military contingents under NATO. The commander's mission is to defeat the insurgency and expand the secure areas in southern Afghanistan. When he tasks us to assist in such operations, I will be the one to give him the bad

news that we don't do things like that any more."

Rule 6. As usual, politics, religion and sex will not be discussed during quiet periods. This rule also applies to these Rules of Engagement.

"No comment and stop snickering!"

When soldiers put their lives on the line, they expect the political direction they receive to make sense and be achievable.

During the times I reported to the United Nations as a field commander, I was appalled at the incomprehensibility of some of the orders issued from that organization. Never in my wildest nightmares did I believe a political party in my own country could conceive of options equally bizarre.

Training the Afghan army and protecting development and reconstruction operations without the security provided by pro-active military operations by Canadian soldiers significantly increases the risk to life and limb.

Retired Major-General Lewis MacKenzie was the first commander of UN peacekeeping forces in Sarajevo

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