

POSTED AT 8:55 AM EDT ON 14/09/06

Afghanistan: Just where is Canada's national interest?

MICHAEL BYERS
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

Thirty-two young Canadians killed, more than 100 seriously injured.

. Rather than consider the deployment of more troops and more armour, it's time for a hard-nosed assessment of where the Canadian national interest lies.

Let's be honest: We all have a tipping point at which we'd call for the withdrawal of Canadian troops.

Jack Layton's came earlier than most. But those who've criticized him have tipping points, too. I defy any of the champions of the mission to say that it's worth the lives of 1,000 Canadian soldiers. They won't, because it's not, so let's assess where our national tipping point should be.

Related to this article

Latest Comments

- Start a conversation on this story



The Taliban do not pose a threat to the existence of Canada. They're not about to invade. They're not developing weapons of mass destruction and missiles capable of reaching Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal. If they were, Saddam Hussein would still be running things in Baghdad.

The al-Qaeda elements sheltering behind the Taliban don't pose a threat to Canada's existence either. They certainly provide moral and perhaps technical support to aspiring terrorists elsewhere. But again, if the threat were truly serious, Washington would not have shifted its focus.

Nor would President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan be allowed to conclude deals with pro-Taliban militants along the border of Afghanistan, while denying NATO forces access to that region.

Clearly, we have a national interest in curtailing al-Qaeda, wherever it's found. But is the current mission the most appropriate response? Does it undermine our national interest elsewhere?

Let's assess the evidence. After five years of counterinsurgency efforts by U.S., British and now Canadian troops, southern Afghanistan has become more, rather than less, dangerous. The Taliban are recruiting new fighters. As Canadian Major-General Andrew Leslie said last year: "Every time you kill an angry young man overseas, you're creating 15 more who will come after you."

As for our national interest in curtailing the drug trade, opium production has actually increased during the current mission.

Since 2001, we have managed to keep the numbers of people killed in terrorist attacks remarkably low -- indeed, at or below pre-9/11 levels. But how much of this is due to the counterinsurgency mission, as opposed to improved intelligence gathering and airport security? To some degree, the mission might be increasing the risk of terrorism.

Some of the recently foiled plots, in Toronto and London, for instance, were motivated, at least in part, by anger at the presence of Western troops in Afghanistan. In this context, Iraq provides a sobering lesson. Is the world a safer place because of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein?

We must also consider the opportunity costs. Canada's response to the escalating dangers has been to assign more soldiers to the counterinsurgency. Before being voted out of office, Paul Martin nearly doubled the size of the battle group in Kandahar. As a result, we're told that the commitment in Afghanistan precludes our participation in missions elsewhere, just as NATO is asking for even more troops to be sent.

Today, a UN peacekeeping mission is deploying in Lebanon. The maintenance of the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah is clearly in Canada's national interest, since the Middle East conflict has the potential to escalate into a war with Iran, involving attacks on nuclear facilities. Moreover, far more Canadians have personal connections with Israel and Lebanon than with Afghanistan.

In addition to Lebanon, there's a genocide to be stopped in Darfur.

Withdrawing from the counterinsurgency mission would entail costs, at least if done abruptly. But there are 26 NATO countries, and Canada -- with its relatively small population and military -- has made the third-largest contribution to the mission. If the majority of NATO countries think the mission is in their national interest, it's time to step up to the plate.

Whatever the mission, our soldiers want to succeed. But they're not qualified, paid or well positioned to assess the national interest.

What's more, their personal interests are too heavily engaged. The front-line soldiers can't risk being seen to disagree with the generals, and no general wants his career to be marked by a forced withdrawal.

Our Chief of the Defence Staff is particularly invested. General Rick Hillier used all of his skills to persuade the Martin government to volunteer for the counterinsurgency. For him, a withdrawal might entail so much loss of face that he'd feel compelled to resign. So be it. The national interest must not be distorted by the personal interests of any one man.

The same logic applies to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who said in March that "Canadians don't cut and run at the first sign of trouble." Yes, indeed. But surely 32 deaths of Canadian soldiers constitute more than the "first sign of trouble?"

At what point does stubbornness become stupidity? At what point should a leader's responsibility for the national interest trump concerns about his own political fate?

Canada's in a hole. It's time to stop digging.

Michael Byers holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia.

He is the author of War Law: Understanding International Law and Armed Conflict.

© Copyright 2006 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.



globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher