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Rambo Rick has a new strategy

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Canada has, apparently, revised its military mission in Afghanistan. It is stepping back and encouraging Afghan forces to bear more responsibility for taking the fight to the Taliban, and presumably suffer more casualties.

Surely the Afghan army should be the lead force in the defence of its own country. But until very recently most NATO forces in Afghanistan didn't think it was capable. It was felt, still felt by some, that the Afghan forces lack the leadership, the training and the equipment necessary to do the job.

The interesting thing about this change is that the announcement didn't come from the prime minister, who has shown a great deal of interest in the Afghan mission, nor from the minister of defence, but from General Rick 'Rambo' Hillier in a newspaper interview two weeks ago.

Sitting down for a cozy, exclusive interview with Bruce Campion-Smith of the Toronto Star's Ottawa bureau, the general outlined, quite literally, using a pen and a pad, how Canada's mission would evolve.

It was Gen. Hillier who announced Canada's strategy for its withdrawal from Afghanistan, not the political leadership. This announcement comes just a few weeks before the recall of Parliament where it is anticipated the issue of Canada's continued presence in Afghanistan is to be debated.

This is not the first time Gen. Hillier has stepped in to fill what some might consider to be a void. It was Gen. Hillier who signed a protocol with the Afghans concerning the disposition of Taliban prisoners captured by Canadian forces. The protocol was signed with little or no input from Canadian diplomats and it proved to be lacking critical details on the treatment these prisoners would receive in the hands of the Afghans. This led to charges of prisoner abuse.

Presumably Rambo Rick had the acquiescence of the prime minister when he announced our exit strategy. It is a strategy strikingly similar to what the Americans are using to extricate themselves from the mess they created in Iraq. This similarity is not surprising since Gen. Hillier spent a significant period with the American military in Texas, and on foreign policy, the prime minister tends to follow many American initiatives.

The 'new' strategy will be for Canadian troops to provide increased training and mentoring for the Afghan army. The emphasis will shift from fighting, to training, to development work.

Gen. Hillier told the Star that Canadians have worked with one of the Afghan battalions and they have improved dramatically. "Our soldiers were telling me it's like looking in a mirror and seeing our own tactics and drills and skills being implemented by these guys."

"They're very professional," said the general, "They've actually been very successful in most operations against the Taliban."

This is not dissimilar to what the American military said when they changed their tactics in Iraq. But what soon happened there was the insurgency shifted its focus from the American to the Iraqi troops, particularly new recruits. Things don't look quite as rosy these days.

Gen. Hillier and the Afghans should expect a similar shift in focus by the Taliban. We have seen that what works in Iraq, i.e. more powerful mines and suicide bombers, soon gets imported to Afghanistan.

The Canadian public should continue to be skeptical of military rhetoric about the Afghan mission, particularly about the time frame of Canada's participation. Those who argue that Canadian troops should stay until there is a successful, stable, democratic government in Kabul often point to the decades Canadian peacekeepers spent in Cyprus.

This ignores major differences in the two missions. Cyprus was a peacekeeping mission mandated by the United Nations, not NATO, to help enforce a negotiated treaty between two warring factions. Regardless of the rationale, the Afghanistan mission was an act of war against a sovereign nation.

Canada's peacekeeping efforts won widespread approval, both at home and abroad. The same cannot be said of the Afghan mission. Many countries, including most NATO nations, don't agree with, and didn't participate in, the invasion of Afghanistan.

Even with the new touchy-feely tone to the Canadian efforts in Kandahar province, Canadians should be cautious about extending the mission beyond 2009. If it is the noble effort NATO claims, then others will step up to the plate. If not, then maybe it's not so noble.

As to the argument about spreading democracy, Canada has opted to be an example of a functioning multicultural democracy. Exporting, and imposing, our democratic values and institutions is not traditional Canadian foreign policy. Hopefully it never will be.

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