
Put real civilians in these positions

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By all accounts, the Canadian military's Strategic Advisory Team has played a productive role in Afghanistan. Members of the SAT, a group of about 20 military planners, have been embedded with the Afghan bureaucracy and leadership since 2005. The team, established by Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, has been assisting government departments, cabinet ministers and even the office of President Hamid Karzai. Dressed as civilians, and doing the work of civilians, these military officers have distinguished themselves in helping to build civil institutions in the war-ravaged country. To fulfill their mission, however, they should pass the job on to real civilians.

If there is a lesson Canada should be providing to Afghanistan's fledgling democracy, it is that the senior public service advisers to the government should not be military officers. More than that, they should not be foreign military officers. That seems to be understood by the team, insofar as they seek to mix in with local officials not only by wearing civvies but, at least one report says, by growing beards and allowing their hair to exceed the military's usual hair guidelines. But it is not enough that such advisers look like civilians. They need to *be* civilians.

By any standard, the SAT's mission is an unusual one for the military. Justified during the chaotic and transitional early days of the efforts to build democratic governmental institutions, the persistence of military officers in high-level advisory jobs several years on has the potential to harm the legitimacy of the Karzai government by casting them as toadies of an occupying army. There are also considerations with respect to the nature of the advice being given; witness the military's advice on detainee policy when it got a chance to perform the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

The Globe's Christie Blatchford reported on Monday that Canadian diplomats have convinced officials at DFAIT and in the Prime Minister's Office to end the SAT's mission by the end of the year. There are suspicions that the push is intended to pre-empt the results of John Manley's report on the future of the Afghan mission. It is also suggested by some defenders of the SAT that internecine battles with other, civilian agencies of the Canadian government are responsible for the moves to shut the team down. Both are likely true. But regardless of the motivation behind any moves to end the mission, the decision is the right one. For all their talents, Canada's soldiers are best equipped to soldier.

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