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PRINT EDITION

'Bureaucratic jealousy' threatens military team

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Canada's smallest and arguably most influential group in Afghanistan is under the gun and may be at risk of being disbanded.

The Strategic Advisory Team or SAT, now in its third iteration, is a group of about 20 high-level military planners who are embedded in the country's fledgling government in Kabul.

Composed of senior Canadian Forces personnel - they are French and English, male and female and from the navy, air force and army - the SAT members work intimately with Afghans trying to build or rebuild institutions of the frail Afghan state.

But diplomats - reportedly led by Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan, Arif Lalani - have convinced senior officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's office that the team should be shut down at the end of the year, The Globe and Mail has learned.

Indeed, when Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and deputy party leader Michael Ignatieff were in Kabul for their surprise weekend visit to Afghanistan, they spent time at the Canadian embassy but were not taken the few steps to the SAT headquarters right next door.

Ironically, while in Afghanistan the two senior Liberals called for an end to Canada's combat role in violent Kandahar province and for more non-combat efforts, yet didn't meet the one group that has for three years led the way in some of those very areas.

Indeed, Globe sources say diplomats are urging Mr. Harper's government to act swiftly, pre-empting the release of the

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report of the Manley commission, the panel headed by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley that is to advise Mr. Harper on the shape of Canadian efforts in Afghanistan once the current mandate expires in February, 2009.

The panel is to report to Mr. Harper by the end of this month, and military insiders say they expect that the report likely will refer favourably to the SAT.

Mr. Manley's panel was in Afghanistan late last fall, and sources say its members found the SAT briefing they received much more useful and informed than the one they got from Canadian diplomats.

"At bottom, at the crassest level, this is about bureaucratic jealousy between departments," retired army colonel Mike Capstick, the head of the first SAT, told The Globe yesterday in a telephone interview from his Calgary home.

Mr. Capstick said the efforts to do in the SAT are the culmination of long-standing bitterness from senior officials at Foreign Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency.

When the SAT was first formally set up by Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier in August of 2005, Canada's then-ambassador to Afghanistan Chris Alexander and Nipa Banerjee, then CIDA's head of aid for Afghanistan, were instrumental in helping him determine where the military planners should focus their efforts, Mr. Capstick said, and were enormously helpful.

But Mr. Alexander moved on to the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, where he now works as a UN deputy special representative, and Ms. Banerjee left CIDA in 2006 after three years in Afghanistan.

The SAT concept had its roots in a small group of senior Canadian officers Gen. Hillier, then commander of the International Security Assistance Force to Afghanistan, had lent Afghan President Hamid Karzai in 2004. When Gen. Hillier returned as the chief of staff of the Canadian Forces the next year, Mr. Karzai famously asked him, "Whatever happened to those guys who were always around?"

Gen. Hillier asked if the President wanted more of them, and when he said he did, the first formal SAT team was born. It included a CIDA contract officer, Andy Tamas, who was initially skeptical about how soldiers would manage the collaborative thinking traditional in the development field.

Mr. Tamas, who has more than three decades of development

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work under his belt, quickly became a convert, once saying, "The impact of their effort is plain as day. There's no doubt at all that it's very, very important. If what's needed to counter the insurgents is a functioning government, this [the SAT team] is probably the best return on investment that Canada or any other military is making."

Ms. Banerjee, now a teacher at the University of Ottawa's graduate school of public and international affairs who returns to Afghanistan four times a year, was similarly dubious at the start.

"I'd never met an army person," she told The Globe yesterday. "In Canada, the army is invisible. I wasn't comfortable at first, but I decided I would try my best. And the army people were so co-operative.

"Civilians say they [soldiers] don't understand development, but I found they understand it better than many of us."

Ms. Banerjee also chalks up the internal efforts to disband the SAT to internecine jealousies, saying that because its members work on a daily basis with Afghans, "the army has access" that diplomats don't.

The Canadians on the small team are embedded in three key areas: with the Afghan National Development Strategy and an 18-member working group of Afghans; in the civil service commission (where they are helping locals to build a public service); and in President Karzai's office.

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