

Adrift at sea

Defence policy after Afghanistan

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THE CANADIAN FORCES were ill equipped at the start of the Afghan war and continued to suffer from what one former top general called the “decade of darkness” under successive Liberal governments. When the Conservatives formed a minority government in 2006, many expected funding taken out of military budgets in the 1990s would be reinvested, and aging equipment replaced. True, the Harper government has participated in several of the major conflicts that have erupted around the globe since 2008, but it’s fair to say hopes of defence policy coherence, and an infusion of new resources to match, have been dashed.

In 2008, a couple of years after taking office, the Harper government laid out the *Canada First Defence Strategy* (CFDS), which illustrated its defence commitments to Canada, the Arctic and the international community.¹ The CFDS also outlined procurement objectives to replace Canada’s aging defence equipment, but the strategy did not provide a plan for how Canada would act on the international stage aside from supporting its partners. Defence policy was essentially put on autopilot.

Specific military intervention in support of Canada’s NATO allies has been the hallmark of the Harper government’s foreign and defence policy. The Conservatives have been more reluctant than their opposition days would have suggested to deploying troops in global hot zones. Prime Minister Harper, who for years as opposition leader bemoaned the fact that Canada had not joined the U.S. in its 2003

invasion of Iraq, admitted in 2008 that, had he been prime minister at the time, Canada would have participated, but that it would have been a mistake.²

This metamorphosis can be explained by the reluctance of the public to support missions where the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces would be placed in danger. Canada and its allies experienced heavy losses in Afghanistan as the Conservatives settled into power; the nature of the conflict changed significantly, and the government's willingness to deploy the Canadian Forces abroad tapered.

Nonetheless, the Harper government chose to keep Canada engaged in a new role in Afghanistan, and to participate in the Libya, Mali and Ukraine conflicts. At the same time, Canada's international peacekeeping record has diminished in spite of a rising number of active United Nations personnel and missions. While these decisions can be traced back to the CFDS, there is little sense of policy direction nationally or on the world stage. Military procurement has been a disaster.

Instead of providing a guiding light on the world stage, Canada has entered interventions with its allies with a hands-off approach, disengaged from the UN, and seemingly adrift at sea.

Where is the white paper on defence?

When the Canadian Forces were deployed in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, the impact of years of budget cuts and stalled procurements became apparent. Canadian soldiers arrived in the Afghan desert wearing dark green forest camouflage; the more appropriate uniforms had been sold for surplus. The lightly armoured ILTIS jeeps had to be quickly replaced, as they were extremely vulnerable to improvised explosive devices (IEDs), a cheap but fatal Taliban defence.

In response to the "decade of darkness," the Conservatives made promises in opposition and after forming government that they would reverse years of inadequate spending and put the Canadian Forces at the vanguard of 21st century militaries. First stop was the Arctic. The threatening effects of global climate change, and the dispute between Canada and Denmark concerning Hans Island, prompted a focus on Canada's North. New equipment for the Rangers and three new ice-breakers would help Canada secure its Arctic border. The mantra "use it or lose it" became a policy initiative that separated Conservative proposals from past policy.³

In 2008, the Harper government introduced the Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS). The CFDS outlined a 20-year investment plan to rebuild the Canadian Forces, promising better training and new equipment to meet domestic and international missions, while also providing stimulus to the Canadian economy in response to the 2008 crisis.

Beyond investment, the CFDS described in broad strokes how and where the Canadian Forces would operate: they would protect Canada from domestic terrorism during the Olympics, continue to provide support for NORAD, and assist Canada's international partners in overseas missions. The CFDS did not go as far as providing examples of what future missions might entail, nor did it attempt to describe the current geopolitical or security climate. The natural place for this kind of analysis is a defence white paper, not an Economic Action Plan.

A white paper demonstrates that a government has examined the global nuances and set a course for foreign and defence policy to work in tandem with a mission objective. Unfortunately, Canada has not had a defence white paper since the Chrétien government in 1994. As a likely result, the Harper government's policies have been more reactionary to conflict than preventative. Diplomacy and development endeavours have been pushed aside when they could have been productively employed in a combined effort.

Without a white paper, the government locked itself out of meaningful public debate on the future of the Forces. It also opened the Harper Conservatives to criticism from commentators such as former Progressive Conservative prime minister Joe Clark that the government had no "coherent or consistent approach to defence policy."⁴ According to military historian Jack Granatstein in 2012, "as Canadian troops withdrew from Afghanistan, it became evident that the government had given little thought as to where or how to apply this sophisticated and expensive military capacity next."⁵

Three years later, there is still no indication of a coherent defence or foreign policy, and certainly no sign that a white paper is being planned. Canada participated in missions in Libya, Mali and, most recently, Ukraine and Eastern Europe by acting within a larger coalition. However, these conflicts need a broader approach to rectifying the violence and civil unrest, with a more carefully thought out space for the use of development policy and diplomacy.

Instead, the government chose to project strength and purpose through photo-ops. There were potential political and electoral gains from such a strategy, but high-profile images and flashy big-ticket purchases for the military detracted from meaningful discourse on how Canada would go about rebuilding Afghanistan or taking action in future conflicts. As the former prime minister Clark put it, the Harper government "quickly embraced the American habit of shuttling cabinet members into and out of Afghanistan, to offer direct encouragement to Canadian troops, of course, but also for 'photo-ops' that would incubate and encourage a more macho characterization of Canada's role in the world."⁶

Regrettably, this practice did not end with Afghanistan. After NATO's Libya intervention, Canada was the only country that held a victory parade and fly-by.⁷

Four years after the air campaign began, Libya is still in the chaos of civil war. In the case of Canada's assistance to Ukraine, James Bezan, parliamentary secretary to the minister of national defence, was flown in at the last minute for an announcement related to the delivery of non-lethal military aid.⁸

Afghanistan and beyond: the crescendo and diminuendo of violence

After taking power in 2006, the Harper government soon realized how unpopular the continuation of the combat mission in Afghanistan was becoming — and how different, with a strong upsurge in Taliban activity. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) responded in September that year by launching Operation MEDUSA, an attempt to root out Taliban forces from their strongholds. The intensification of operations produced a marked increase in allied casualties.⁹ In Canada, the government established the Highway of Heroes to foster a sense of national pride in the mission, but the public was beginning to want Canada to pull out of Afghanistan or move toward a non-combat role.

In 2008, the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan issued the Manley Report, named after its chair, John Manley, which stated that Canada should refocus on reconstruction and training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). When the Afghan mission was extended in 2010, Prime Minister Harper incorporated these recommendations. The training mission was deemed a “non-combat” mission and the Canadian public supported it as such. By the end of 2010, 138 Canadians had been killed in action in Afghanistan.¹⁰

But obviously even a non-combat mission in a warzone can be dangerous, as our ISAF partners were finding out. The insurgency had changed tactics yet again. The Taliban put operatives into training and recruitment centres or extorted others to carry out attacks on their behalf. The objective was not only to target ISAF personnel, but also to erode Afghan interest in signing up to fight the Taliban. This tactic had the further effect of placing a wedge between ISAF personnel and their recruits: suspicions that new trainees were actually Taliban supporters increased with every “green on blue” attack. Calls for allied troop withdrawal grew louder in all countries involved each time a soldier was sent back in a casket.

Training ANSF personnel was an integral part of ensuring that the Afghans could provide their own security so the ISAF could stand down. Unfortunately, decades of war left a mark on the country. According to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, writing in 2011, 86% of Afghan soldiers were “illiterate and drug use is still an endemic problem.”¹¹ A year later, the Associated Press reported their own

finding that more than 95% of the recruits for the ANSF were illiterate.¹² According to the Department of National Defence (DND), by April 2012, “the Afghan national security forces had 119,707 of their personnel enrolled in literacy programs that employ nearly 2,800 Afghan teachers in 1,551 classrooms.”¹³ ISAF not only had to train the ANSF, but also to teach its personnel basic literacy skills.

The goal of building a credible military and security force was impeded by the requirement to bring personnel to a professional and specialized level. This was not just a Canadian issue; it was a combination of problems with the ISAF training program and the socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan after decades of war. U.S. Major General Michael T. Flynn, in a report for the Centre for a New American Security, outlined that even after the 2014 ISAF withdrawal additional training and equipment would be needed for the Afghan Air Force, as well as special operations forces, medical personnel, counter-IED (improvised explosive devices) capability and intelligence collection.¹⁴ A similar lack of specialized training was afflicting U.S. programs in Iraq, and still afflicts Iraqi forces today.

Canada did not suffer any casualties during its post-2010 training mission, unlike many of its partners, possibly due to the nature of Canada’s contribution to the wider NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM-A). It was later revealed that the focus of Canada’s efforts, located in Kabul with satellite teams in Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat, was to,

assist the Afghan leadership and instructor cadre with tasks such as curriculum design and development of teaching skills. The task force also included senior officers who were integrated into the NTMA command team, and a significant contingent of experienced staff personnel who served at NTM-A Headquarters.¹⁵

As such, Canadian Forces personnel were not exposed to potential Taliban fighters posing as raw recruits, since they were training the leadership and instructor cadre who were cleared and had demonstrated their commitment to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

NATO over Libya: a tale of two lessons

The Afghan war was not the only conflict that Canada and NATO decided to contend with. The Middle East radically changed with the widespread democratic uprisings of the Arab Spring. Protests began in Libya in 2009, but violence did not erupt until 2011 when unrest hit the capital of Benghazi. Government airstrikes and cluster munitions were used on the civilian population.¹⁶ Clashes between Colonel Gadhafi’s security forces and protesters escalated into a full-blown civil war.

There were many factions within the rebel coalition that formed the National Transitional Council in February 2011. On March 19 that year, a multinational coalition formed to carry out UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which aimed for “immediate ceasefire in Libya including an end to the current attacks against civilians,” which the security council said “might constitute crimes against humanity.” A no-fly zone was imposed over Libya, and on March 25, a NATO coalition took charge of the mission dubbed Operation Unified Protector.

Canada not only participated in the mission, but Lieutenant-General Joseph ‘Charlie’ Bouchard would later command it.¹⁷ NATO’s objective was to enforce the no-fly zone, ensure there was a naval blockade to interdict potential arms supplies or smuggling, and to do what it could to ensure that civilian casualties were limited during the conflict. As a first step, NATO took out Libyan anti-air assets on the ground to give allied planes full and free coverage of the skies. Once this was done, coalition aircraft went after government targets, including vehicles, to minimize the conflict.

With the air campaign over, it soon came out that Canada’s CF-18 fighter jets, now safely back home, had conducted 946 sorties, or 10% of all NATO air sorties.¹⁸ This engagement was disproportionate to other coalition members, raising real concerns of wear and tear on the CF-18 fleet in the Royal Canadian Air Force.¹⁹

The fleet is nearing the end of its lifecycle. Canada acquired 138 CF-18s between 1982 and 1988, and at the time of operations in Libya only 77 remained serviceable. Prior to the Libya mission, the CF-18s had already used up 73% of their flying hours, which is about 8,000 hours per aircraft.²⁰ Because combat missions can add up to three times the strain of regular flights, Libya could have added 9,000 hours total — or 1,500 hours per fighter jet.²¹ Even though Canada has 77 CF-18s, not all of them are mission capable because of regular or unscheduled repair.

The real impact of the Libya mission on Canada’s fleet is unknown. Yet lifecycle concerns did not deter the government from deploying six more CF-18s, and dozens of support personnel, to Eastern Europe to be of use to, and provide training for, Ukraine in its civil war and conflict with Russia.²² Canada has deployed a further six CF-18s to Kuwait to assist in the degradation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).²³ Whether or not one agrees with Canada’s participation in these missions, we should be weary of the operational readiness of the CF-18 fleet.

The consequences of Libya: Mali

The unrest in Libya did not end with the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime. The Libyan governing authority is split into two competing factions, as various militias and

militant groups continue to operate in the country. Canadian military intelligence predicted that chaos would continue with the regime change.²⁴ Although the mission is deemed to be a just war, there was little follow up by its members or the UN to ensure that the freer Libyan state and people would not slide into perpetuating violence.²⁵

The violence did not end at the border, either. Gadhafi had welcomed ethnic Tuaregs from North Africa to Libya. Some were employed in the oil and gas industry, others found themselves in the Libyan military and Gadhafi's Islamic Legion. The ethnic Tuareg population is spread across North Africa, but there is a history of conflict involving the Tuareg in Mali since its independence. The catalyst for the 2012 conflict was the fall of the Gadhafi regime. According to the United Nations, based on reports by neighbouring countries, "rocket propelled grenades, machine guns with anti-aircraft visors, automatic rifles, ammunition, grenades, explosives (Semtex), and light anti-aircraft artillery (light calibre bi-tubes) mounted on vehicles" are being smuggled out of Libya.²⁶ The migration of people and weapons is destabilizing Mali and the Sahel region.

Before the fall of Gadhafi, the Malian state endured three conflicts with the ethnic Tuareg population in the north. In January 2012, a fourth erupted. The displaced Tuaregs returned to Mali to find worse socioeconomic conditions than when they and their families had left. According to USAID figures in 2004, the three largest Malian cities in the north suffered poverty rates of between 77% and 92%.²⁷ There are few socio-economic development projects in northern Mali, and even these are eroded by bribery and corruption.

A catastrophic drought in 2010 compounded the stress of extreme poverty and ethnic disengagement, leading to the 2012 rebellion, in which we saw the secular Tuareg group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MLNA), unite with Islamic extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Ansar al-Dine. The insurgent coalition proved successful against the poorly armed and trained Malian army. But by the time France decided to intervene, the insurgent coalition was no more. The Islamists betrayed the MNLA, forcibly removing them before taking position outside the Malian capital of Bamako.

In the Canadian media, Mali was portrayed as "Africa's Afghanistan" and there was speculation on what Canada's involvement could be. The Harper government did not send soldiers, but it did send a C-17 Globemaster to fill an important strategic lift capability lacked by French forces. Canada's contribution would be to transport heavy armoured vehicles and supplies and assist with the logistics involved with this task.

This was very much a non-combat role (the insurgents did not have the capacity to bring down a C-17) — a support mission that was politically safe for the Harper

government. It also had economic dimensions. Mali is the third largest gold producer in Africa with Canadian investment playing a part in the industry. In 2012, following the military coup, Canada was one of the first countries to provide bilateral aid and continues to support the long-term development of the country.²⁸ It is highly likely that another conflict will erupt in the future and that it will be compounded by the effects of global climate change, the lack of development in the north, and long-term mediation issues between the Tuaregs and the national government.²⁹

New insurgents on the block: Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was surprising for many defence analysts. The initial gains of ISIS, with the capture of Mosul and the nearby Iraqi military base, were only the beginning of a series of massive gains in Iraq as well as Syria. Today, ISIS maintains a sizable amount of territory across both countries and has waged operations in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. The western “degradation” campaign, to which Canada is a partner, has had little success against the nimble and opportunistic tactics of ISIS.

Canada has committed six CF-18s for air strikes on ISIS targets. We have also sent 69 members of the Canadian Special Operations Regiment to conduct an “advise and assist” mission. Although these contributions are portrayed to the media and the Canadian public as part of a “non-combat mission,” Canada lost one soldier early on in a friendly fire incident and has been engaged more than once by ISIS insurgents where Canadian Forces personnel had to fire back.

The mission’s threat level was forecasted as “low,” but that does not mean zero. Brigadier-General Michael Rouleau stated that 80% of the mission occurs many kilometers behind enemy lines. The other 20% consists of advising the Iraqi military on how to set up defences to halt the ISIS advance, and then assisting in operational planning.

The real issue with Iraq is, as it was in Afghanistan, training. The Iraqi military is different from what it was before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. That army was dismantled and the newly trained forces lack specialization. The U.S. and its allies were more concerned with the number of personnel in the Iraqi forces than their quality, quite similar to the Afghan training model. For example, there is a lack of Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technicians to disarm IEDs. An overall lack of specialists has taken its toll on the effectiveness of the Iraqi military. With a force consisting of 225 fighters, a single Abrams tank, a pair of mortars, two artillery

pieces and about 40 armoured Humvees, it took 30 days for the Iraqis to make the 40 km trek from Bagdad to Beiji to recapture the city and its oil refineries.³⁰

It is clear that the Canadian Forces will not be assisting in the training of the Iraqi military in this current climate. It is an election year and the friendly-fire death of Sgt. Andrew Joseph Doiron has soured the Iraq mission for many Canadians. Defence Minister Jason Kenny has outright stated this would be a U.S. responsibility, thus backing Canada away from any meaningful participation and wounding Canada-U.S. relations in the process.³¹ It would be useful in these moments to be able to reference a Canadian anti-terrorism strategy, but like the missing defence white paper, nothing approaching what is needed currently exists.

Ukraine: photo-ops from the “New Cold War”

The crisis in Ukraine first appeared to be a civil uprising against a seemingly corrupt government. The Russian annexation of Crimea escalated the conflict to what is sometimes called a hybrid war requiring non-conventional responses.³² Ukraine is facing a state-sponsored insurgency that aims to destabilize the government’s influence over its citizens through the deployment of Special Forces, propaganda campaigns, the development of local militias, and even cyber warfare. Economic sanctions were introduced against Russia as a counter-measure along with an increased NATO presence in Eastern Europe to signal support of the alliance’s newer members, but also Ukraine.

Canada’s support for the NATO mission has consisted of sending six CF-18s and 200 support staff to Eastern Europe to participate in training exercises and to patrol Eastern Europe. Canada has also sent soldiers to Poland to conduct airborne and infantry exercises with U.S. and Polish allies. A Canadian frigate is taking part in the Standing NATO Maritime Group One in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea.

Most recently, the Harper government promised to send 200 soldiers to Eastern Ukraine to provide training for Ukrainian forces. This training mission is different from those in Afghanistan and Iraq in that it includes providing expertise in countering IEDs and mines, and may also include instructions on logistics and military policing.³³ It is markedly more than what Canada has committed to countering the spread of ISIS.

While there is no doubt that elements of the Russian military are operating in Eastern Ukraine, the Harper government has used Russia in the past to portray itself as being the tough guy on the international stage.³⁴ In 2007, 2009 and 2010, the government claimed that Russian strategic TU-95MS “Bear” bombers entered Can-

adian airspace. NORAD officials contradicted and downplayed these claims, stating the Russian bombers were on routine missions and did not enter U.S. or Canadian airspace. Similar Canadian grandstanding has taken place in the Ukraine conflict.

MP James Bezan, as parliamentary secretary to Minister Kenney, told the House of Commons that since arriving in the Black Sea, “Royal Canadian Navy sailors have been confronted by Russian warships and buzzed by Russian fighter jets.”³⁵ Kenney repeated the claims the next day. When confronted about the matter, the Department of National Defence referred to NATO, which contradicted the government. NATO officials affirmed the aircraft was flying at a higher altitude. There were also conflicting reports of a previous fly-by incident in 2013.³⁶ Such claims and counter-claims strain Canada’s relationship with its allies and cheapen the work of the Canadian Forces, all seemingly for domestic and partisan tricks.

The crisis in Ukraine has been molded at home to fit the Harper government’s public relations narrative. None of Canada’s allies have, like Bezan, made last-minute arrangements to be on board Air Force cargo planes to deliver non-lethal military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.³⁷ In his recent book, former prime minister Clark challenges the political opportunism: “In the six decades after the end of the Second World War, this country’s international policy was *Canadian*, not partisan.”³⁸

Peacekeeping

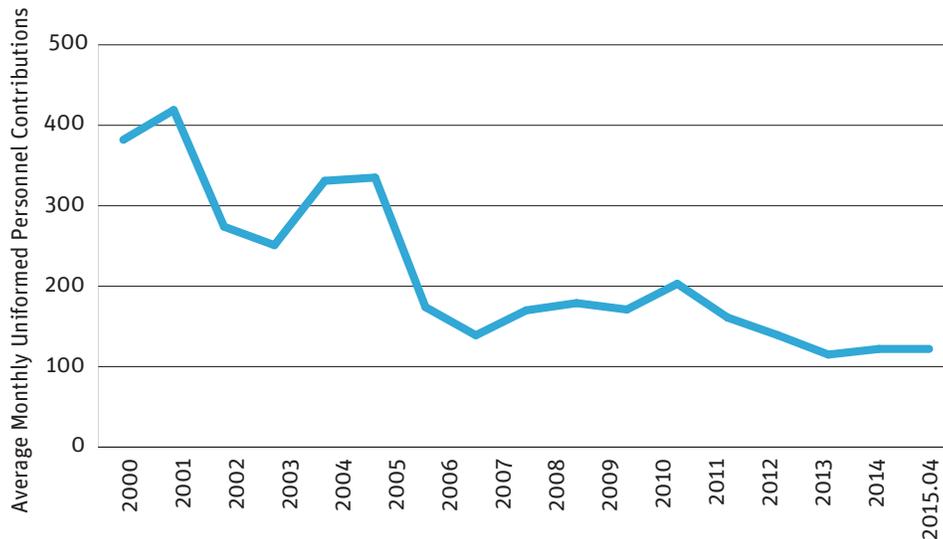
Canada has participated in a multitude of conflicts within the past decade, but, as we have seen, without a coherent defence or foreign affairs policy direction. One of the clearer features of the Harper government’s defence posture has been its disengagement from the United Nations.

Canada’s participation in UN peacekeeping operations dropped sharply after 2001, as shown in *Figure 1*. This could be explained by the concentration of operations in Afghanistan. But for a country that prides itself on its peacekeeping heritage, Canada’s 68th place world ranking in terms of contributions to peacekeeping efforts will not sit well.

Now compare Canada’s decline in participation with the steady increase over the same period in global participation in UN peacekeeping missions (*Figure 2*). There is a growing need for peacekeeping and the missions are more intense than they have ever been. And yet, in 2006, as a sign of Canada’s change of heart, the Harper government rejected a request for participation in a Lebanon peacekeeping mission.³⁹

Looking only at numbers, however, we miss the transformation in peacekeeping itself over the past 15 years. The current peacekeeping mission in the Demo-

FIGURE 1 Canadian Peacekeeping Contributions
(Averaged Over The Year)



SOURCE UN Peacekeeping

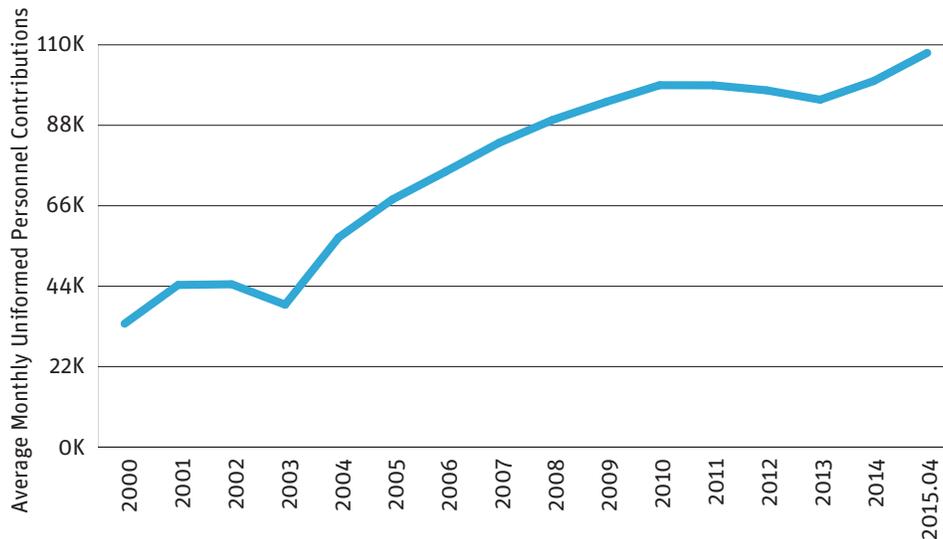
cratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, does not fit the classic model of inter-state conflict where the UN provides a buffer between government forces. It is instead a conflict fueled by rebel groups and the shadow of ethnic divisions in Rwanda, with UN peacekeepers taking active measures against the M23 and other rebel groups in DRC. As such, it is more like a counter-terrorism exercise.

Peacekeeping missions in Mali and Somalia also more closely resemble counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency models as per recent trends.⁴⁰ It is fine to criticize the Harper government for wanting to transform the reputation of the Canadian Forces from peacekeeper to warfighter. However, by doing so, we miss an opportunity to discuss how Canada's experience with counterinsurgency—in Kandahar, for example—might be passed on to others in the interests of peacekeeping.

Canada once had a centre that trained international military personnel on the secrets of peacekeeping operations. It was called the Lester B. Pearson International Peacekeeping Training Centre, located in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia. But like so many other government programs, this one did not survive post-2008 government cuts to the public sector. The Harper government closed the centre in 2013.⁴¹ Not only will its lessons not be passed on, they may be forgotten.

In 2010, the UN reached out to Canada for help in DRC, asking if Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie could head the 25,500-strong peacekeeping (or peace enforcement) force in the country. The Harper government continued its disengage-

FIGURE 2 Global Peacekeeping Contributions
(Averaged Over The Year)



SOURCE UN Peacekeeping

ment from UN peacekeeping by declining the UN request – the second time since 2008.⁴² The mission would have required only a few dozen Canadian Forces personnel, but the government decided its full concentration would be on Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Harper’s historic support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, if later admitted to be a mistake, helped cement the belief a Conservative government would create a warrior-centric model for the Canadian Forces. If the peacekeeping record suggests this transformation is happening (if not complete), the lack of a cohesive foreign and defence strategy to replace Canada’s historical UN-focused engagement suggests a lack of focus, even seven years into the Canada First Defence Strategy.

The changing situation in Afghanistan in 2006, especially the marked increase in wounded and casualties, led the Harper government to intervene in future conflicts in a manner that would ensure the risks were low. Canada has provided logistical support for the French in Mali, conducted and planned airstrikes in Libya and Iraq, and is offering training to government forces in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. Canada is providing specialized training to Ukrainian soldiers, but has refrained from imparting the same skills to the Iraqi army for reasons no one has explained, but which leave the latter ill-equipped to handle the ISIS threat.

Haughty promises of reversing Liberal defence cuts and fixing procurement failures have proven empty. The Harper government has demonstrated it can develop an economic plan on defence procurement, but that it has no interest in the difficult task of producing a white paper on defence policy to provide an objective and guidance for that procurement. Instead, high profile and politically opportunistic photo-ops provide the illusion that the Conservatives are the only party that truly supports the military.

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