

Canada Pulls Out of Peacekeeping

WALTER DORN

27 March 2006

The Canadian Forces said a final goodbye to the UN peacekeeping operation on the Golan Heights on Friday after 32 years of service. Canadian troops have helped keep the peace in that tense area of the Middle East, preventing flare-ups between opposing Israeli and Syrian forces since shortly after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Indian forces will now keep the watch in places where Canadian soldiers once stood. The ending of Canada's Task Force Golan is understandable after three decades of admirable service, but it comes as part of a much more alarming trend: a general retreat from UN peacekeeping.

With this withdrawal of 190 troops from the Golan, Canada will have fewer than 60 soldiers under the UN flag, out of 68,000 UN peacekeepers deployed worldwide. The Golan close-out drops Canada from a mediocre 33rd place to a dismal 50th in the rank of contributors to UN missions. This rank would be much worse, were it not for the Canadian police serving in UN missions. Surprisingly, the RCMP and other Canadian police departments are contributing twice as many personnel to UN operations as the Canadian military. And there are no substantial troop commitments in the pipeline for the UN.

Gone are the glory days when Canada was one of the top-10 troop contributors. At the end of the Cold War, Canadian leaders boasted that Canada was the only nation to have contributed to every UN peacekeeping operation, as well as having served as the initiator of the first UN peacekeeping force in 1956. Now, we provide an almost insignificant contribution in numbers, with a handful of soldiers in less than half of the UN's 18 missions at a time when UN peacekeeping is surging.

Canada is disappointing the UN and its own long-standing peacekeeping tradition, not only in the field, but also at UN headquarters. There is not a single serving Canadian officer in the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in New York. When a Canadian colonel recently won a tough competition for the prized position of DPKO Chief of Staff, the bosses at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa refused to let him serve at the UN -- they placed higher priority on the swirling internal transformation process that the leadership is pushing in Ottawa.

Operationally, the Canadian Forces have decided on an almost exclusive focus on Afghanistan, in a partnership with the United States, whose priority is offensive operations. The peace-building mandate is commendable, but it is jeopardized by the aggressive operations launched by our main partner. Rather than distancing Canada from U.S. search-and-destroy missions, our country's leaders chose to place our troops in Kandahar under the U.S., though the mission is scheduled for handover to NATO in the summer. Granted, a Canadian one-star general took over

responsibility for the Kandahar region from the commander of U.S. Task Force Gun Devil in February, but, at present, Canada is under the chain of command of Operation Enduring Freedom with two- and three-star American generals directing from above in Afghanistan and even more senior officials calling the shots strategically from Washington.

Things could be different. A Canadian contribution of 2,300 troops -- the number currently in Afghanistan -- to UN operations would provide a tremendous boost to the United Nations as it struggles to run critical operations in many parts of the world, including Sudan, Haiti and Congo. Canada would once again be in the top-10 list of the world's peacekeepers. And the Canadian mission in New York would no longer have to make excuses when the UN comes knocking. The current preoccupation with Afghanistan is also very expensive for Canada, as no one is sharing the bill for our work and, with tragic irony, Canadian strength is being sapped from critical UN operations for which the UN is ready to share the financial burden.

Also in doctrine, the Canadian Forces leadership is replacing the time-honoured concepts of peacekeeping and peace-support operations with the "three-block war," a term coined by a former U.S. Marine Corps commandant. It advocates combining peacekeeping and humanitarian activities with war-fighting, all in the same mission -- an impossible task. An enemy-centred mentality is creeping inexorably into the Canadian military psyche. The previous notions of negotiated consent, impartiality and minimum use of force (formerly criteria for Canadian participation in peacekeeping) are being replaced by a more aggressive goal of "a high-intensity fight" against the "armies of failing states," to use the words from a recent army poster.

Unfortunately, Canada can no longer be called a committed peacekeeper, and certainly it is no longer the prolific peacekeeper. This sad conclusion can, however, be balanced with hope. The Canadian Forces remain extremely competent to take on UN peacekeeping tasks, especially in the more robust operations the UN is now sponsoring. The bilingual, multicultural and combat-trained forces, with extensive experience in the world's conflict zones, have retained the means to uphold the proud tradition of peacekeeping.

In coming years, Canada could redirect its efforts for the maintenance of international peace and, in this way, secure a continuing place of pride and influence in the world.

Walter Dorn is a professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College. He has served with the UN in the field in East Timor and Ethiopia and at UN headquarters in New York.