

Managerial Technicalism

The Evolving Nature of Canadian Decision Making in the Afghanistan War, 2001–2014

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More than 40,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) served in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014, operating under the aegis of three separate prime ministers, from across partisan lines.¹ Measured in blood, treasure, and prestige, it was the costliest and most significant deployment of Canadian soldiers since the Korean War. Canadians served bravely and with great distinction in defending the nation's interests overseas, enabling security and development for the beleaguered Afghan populace, and demonstrating to allies that Canada was a serious and dependable multilateral partner. In the name of these interests, more than 2,000 members of the CAF incurred wounds or injury over the duration of the conflict. By the end of the mission, 165 Canadians, among them seven civilians, had paid the ultimate price.² It is in their name, their memory, and their debt to which Canada's strategic community must faithfully and honestly account for why we fought in faraway Afghanistan and identify the lessons that must be learned from the nation's lethal experience there.

Canada's involvement in Afghanistan began in the days and weeks immediately after the dreadful events of the 9/11 terror attacks, with combat operations drawing to a close a full decade later in 2011. In the three years following, a contingent of Canadian advisers stayed on to train and strengthen the Afghan National Army before they too at last returned home as well. To date, there is still much lingering ambiguity as to the purpose and objectives of the Canadian war effort. In a 2009 interview with *Maclean's*, General Rick Hillier, a pivotal figure in the army leadership, doubted the efficacy of the state's messaging to the public, wondering out loud "where the communications [are] being done because hundreds of thousands of Canadians don't know what's happening."³ Similarly, the war and its historiography has been associated with "epistemological confusion," existing in a state of "almost suspended animation" and characterized by a surreal feeling of "sleepwalking through history."⁴ To start sifting through and making sense of the heuristic murk of Ottawa's policy-making, some base recognitions are necessary.

Canada's obligation to its allies and to the Afghan people evolved in several distinct phases. To bureaucrats and governmental apparatchiks, each phase came

with its own goals, opportunities, and difficulties and were seen as natural responses to the commensurate threats facing the mission in Afghanistan. To the public, poor communication and divides in regional attitudes turned the populace's perception of the conflict into an ungainly and unending military morass. From the wider strategic perspective, Canada's involvement in Afghanistan must be viewed through the lens of the American unipolar moment at its imperious zenith, facilitating an international superstructure that permitted and encouraged such an outsized Canadian contribution.

When contextualized alongside Canada's own long history of external engagement, the Afghan effort can be considered an elaborate balancing act between multiple theoretical and tactical trends, including internationalism in its active and liberal subvariants, forward security and neoclassical realism, alliance dynamics, and physically building the Afghan nation from the ground on up. This precise balancing act, fought partially in briefing books and the allocation of departmental budgets, exhibited elements of managerial and technical doctrines, producing a discrete philosophy of war and decision making that can be retroactively construed as *managerial technicalism*.

"Managerialism," in a critical definition provided by the sociologist Thomas Klikauer, is the application of "one-dimensional managerial techniques to all areas of work, society, and capitalism on the grounds of superior ideology, expert training, and the exclusiveness of managerial knowledge necessary to run public institutions and society as corporations."⁵ Its contemporary corollary—technicalism—can be deemed as the excessive intrusion of technical acronymization, terminologization, and proceduralization into a policy-making method that found itself more concerned with minute details and the "objective" measurement of success than on sweeping ideas or the articulation of a grand stratagem that incorporated the anxieties and emotions of the public with it.

As planning for Afghanistan fell deeper and deeper into the hands of bureaucratic Svengalis and professionals besot with their own expertise—obsessing over episodic questions of logistics, multilateral haggling over troop contributions, financial inlays, and developmental assistance—the farther it drifted from the imagination of the Canadian public. Expectations of peacekeeping clashed with the violent realities of war being broadcast on the nightly news. Casualties mounted, support dropped, and beyond a small clique in Ottawa few could remember the valid and noble reasons why Canada was continuing to fight the Taliban insurgency. As General Hillier put it, "[W]hat I would actually like to see is a strategic discussion, not just about what we do in Afghanistan but about Canada's place in the world. But in this constant minority government, always in election campaign mode, with a very vitriolic Parliament, it's impossible to have

that sort of strategic discussion.”⁶ Perhaps now, from the vantage point of hindsight, is a good time to have the kind of discussion that General Hillier had envisioned, beginning with the international context precipitating the Canadian intervention in 2001.

9/11 and the Unipolar World

The ignominious events of 11 September 2001, acted as the unquestionable catalyst for Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan. As Bill Graham, Canadian minister of foreign affairs between 2002 and 2004, and minister of defence between 2004 and 2006, later reflected: “[T]he tragic truth was that Canadians had been killed in the World Trade Center. September 11 was—and felt like—an attack on us, as well as on the United States.”⁷ Twenty-four Canadians perished that day, bringing home a new international paradigm in which further globalization and economic integration was threatened by acts of terrorism concocted on the other end of the world. In this instance, it was the harboring of al-Qaeda extremists by the Afghan Taliban regime that demonstrated how instability manifesting in failed states on the periphery of global affairs can have deadly consequences for those living in its core. The grounding of flights and tightening of the US–Canada border in the days following 9/11 exposed Canada’s economic vulnerabilities, and there was “no question that Canada shared the U.S goal of eliminating al-Qaeda and preventing another attack from occurring in North America.”⁸ If it was New York City on that day, it could easily have been Toronto or Montreal on another.

Within the context of America’s unchallenged unipolar moment, Canada therefore had two immediate priorities after 9/11: first, to prevent its territory from being used as a potential staging ground for attacks against its hegemonic neighbor; and second, to visibly assure the United States that Canada remained a committed and supportive ally. Given time, a third priority developed, consistent with Canada’s traditional policy: constraining the America’s unilateralist impulses through coordination in international institutions—principally NATO and the United Nations. In service of the first priority, Canada’s House of Commons passed the far-reaching Anti-Terrorism Act (Bill C-36), receiving royal assent on 18 December 2001. The second priority was achieved with Canada’s immediate secretive deployment of Joint Task Force 2 personnel to Afghanistan alongside their American equivalents, followed up by the arrival of CAF regular units in January and February 2002.

These initial, limited liability actions were combined with outreach on the diplomatic and political fronts, as Canada vociferously supported the American self-defense invocation of NATO Article 5 on 4 October 2001. Along with the passage of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution

1378 on 14 November 2001, the Article 5 invocation formed the international legal basis for Canada's involvement in the Afghanistan conflict. The importance of abiding by international law and operating with international sanction was a central consideration for Canadian diplomats and military leaders. As Minister Graham has since mentioned:

I had to sometimes remind people like [Secretary of State] Donald Rumsfeld, my American counterpart, that Canada was a signatory to the International Criminal Court, and that circumscribed certain things we could or could not do. This was a constraint that international law had placed on us. All operations of armies today are very much now governed by these whole, very sophisticated concepts that have developed from the Rome Statute. I'm very proud of our troops for being consistent with that.⁹

This dedication to international norms can be seen as a natural outgrowth of Canada's Cold War foreign policy consensus, one focused on "policies and actions designed to contribute to the maintenance of order in the international political system."¹⁰ Of course, the bilateral relationship with the United States will always take foremost precedence for Canada, and with the United States emerging from the Cold War as the singular hegemon, the Canadian state was presented with a new opportunity to reassess its strategic mandate within a more flexible and permissive structural environment.

In a bipolar world, Canada is far more constrained in its ability to showcase leadership or to deviate from the expectations of its allies. In a unipolar system, one might have expected Canada to free-ride off American preeminence, and yet, curiously, this was not the case. In outsize proportion to its material capabilities, Canada on average "supported the sixth largest troop contribution to NATO operations from 2001 to 2011, and the fifth largest in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2011."¹¹ This can be explained by the Canadian desire to maintain a positive and productive relationship with the United States, along with converging interests and values in prosecuting the "War on Terror." Another, more subtle reasoning might have been to downplay American questioning and criticisms of Canada's defense capabilities by participating substantially in the US-led combat mission, as has been previously suggested by scholar Claire Sjolander.¹²

Canada's commitments in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2005, at first under the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and later as part of the joint NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), furthermore gave the country a valid excuse for not following the United States into Iraq in 2003. Thankfully, despite strains in the transatlantic relationship owing to contrasting views on the Iraq War, the mission in Afghanistan was not jeopardized operationally. As Minister Graham admitted: "[I]n terms of the politics of the Afghan

mission, the split between NATO members as to whether they approved of the Iraq mission or not didn't spill over to Afghanistan."¹³ Moreover, the Americans themselves knew that the increased Canadian commitment to Afghanistan practically prevented any ground involvement in nearby Iraq.

For the Liberal cabinet of then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, "U.S. support for Canada's participation in Afghanistan, it was hoped, would temper U.S. frustration with Canada's decision with respect to Iraq. A significant deployment to Afghanistan also allowed the government to demonstrate to its own parliamentary backbenchers (as well as to some members of Cabinet), to the Canadian public, and to the international community, that Canada was a stalwart ally in the fight against terrorism."¹⁴ In hindsight, the US-Canada bilateral and economic relationship was not adversely impacted by the Iraq deliberations, but this was by no means guaranteed at the time. While Canada would have likely returned to Afghanistan anyways under its Article 5 remit, a renewed investment in the mission there served as useful political cover for when the Iraq issue reached its crescendo in March 2003.¹⁵ Afghanistan, in its international context, and as decided by the managerial class, was always the "right war" for Canada to be fighting. This continued to be true, even as the parameters of the mission grew and changed over time.

The Evolution of Canadian Decision-Making

In Afghanistan, the appetite grew with the eating. Not out of greed, or malice, or unwitting overextension, but out of a rather real and pressing sense of necessity. As Canada's stakes in Afghanistan grew, alongside those of its British, Dutch, American, and other NATO allies, so too did the threats it was exposed to by a resurgent Taliban. Though the Northern Alliance had with the help of Coalition forces been able to retake the capital of Kabul within months of the 9/11 attacks and establish a fledgling government there, instability continued to plague the country as a whole.

Under these circumstances, Canada wanted its contributions to stand out and be felt. Initially, when the British declined Canadian participation in ISAF (back when its mandate was still restricted to Kabul and surrounding areas), before then requesting a mere token contingent of forces, Canadian officials "rejected the ISAF option on the grounds that it was not adequate for Canada's rank as a prominent ally. In February 2002 Canada therefore deployed to [Operation Enduring Freedom] the fourth largest contingent of troops after the United States, Germany, and Turkey."¹⁶ After a difficult decade for the CAF's domestic and global reputation in the 1990s, Canada's defense leadership sought to restore public trust in the military through successful participation in OEF. By April 2002,

the country received shocking news of its first deaths in a combat zone since Korea, when four members of the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group, were killed in a fratricidal incident near Tarnak Farm, Kandahar. After a monthslong counterinsurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan, driving much of the Taliban across the border into neighboring Pakistan, the bulk of Canadian ground forces were brought home by the summer to much public and media fanfare.

This initial deployment was light but highly successful and popular. Those who remained did so in a minor capacity, securing Kabul and training the inchoate Afghan National Army and police forces until Prime Minister Chrétien decided once again to ramp up Canada's local presence, in conjunction with ISAF's reorganization under NATO command in 2003. The in-and-out, rotational nature of Canada's Afghanistan policy in these years was perfectly calibrated for the demands of the mission at the time. The Taliban itself had not yet fully regrouped or mutated into the murderous and well-financed insurgency it would soon become. Minister Bill Graham has emphasized the phased manner of Canadian operations in Afghanistan:

Don't forget that our mission there took place in various phases. The first phase was when we went over.... We arrived to be too late to be of any significance. The next phase was ISAF in Kabul itself, which was a limited mission relating to that. Then our rather enlarged and rather significant mission in Kandahar. Those phases, each one of them was different in their nature and what they called for.¹⁷

For the next two years, Canadian units were primarily occupied with stabilization duties, even as a new prime minister (Paul Martin) was reduced to a minority government back home in 2004. In the lead-up to 2005 and the major decision to take responsibility for securing and reconstructing Kandahar Province, the spiritual birthplace of the Taliban, an upswell of new technical jargon entered the war-fighting lexicon of military and civilian authorities. Among these included the twenty-first-century notion of a "three-block war," adapted by Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Rick Hillier from an earlier American theory, taken to mean an approach to warfare (especially in failed states such as Yugoslavia and Afghanistan) where military forces had to be prepared to "conduct humanitarian, peace-keeping/stabilization, and combat operations simultaneously on three separate city blocks, or more widely."¹⁸

The three-block concept was one of many floated as Coalition planners searched for an intellectual foundation to counter the Taliban insurgency running rampant across the Afghan countryside. Where allied forces managed to flush out terrorists in one encounter or village, the combatants seemed to melt away before sud-

denly emerging and striking elsewhere. The Taliban guerrillas were able to blend in among and gather intelligence from the citizenry, usually under threat of violence, then retreat across the mountainous border into Pakistani tribal lands to rest and regain strength. Canada and its allies first tried an “ink blot” or “lily pad” strategy, in which territory taken from insurgents would be converted into a stronghold for the Afghan National Army, setting the stage for “a lasting security environment in the Canadian area of operation,” supposedly allowing for “more interaction [of] troops and civilians . . . with the local population, [and] the more development can be done.”¹⁹ Though a 2008 Senate report contends that “the ink blot is spreading,” this did not significantly manifest or take hold.²⁰ With time, much of the advances made were rolled back by the Taliban due to inexperience and low morale among Afghan national forces, corrupt authorities, and the inability to effectively administer services or facilitate governance within rural jurisdictions. To put it more bluntly, Canada’s ink often dried and faded unless subject to continual (and costly) reapplication.

These complications were by no means unique to the Canadian experience of the war. To approach the conflict and the challenges facing Afghanistan in a more holistic fashion, policy makers championed a “3D” design that emphasized defense, diplomacy, and development in tandem.²¹ Recognizing that the war could not be won on the battlefield alone, Ottawa poured billions into its “whole-of-government” concept that combined the energies of the Department of National Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Canadian International Development Agency, among others, to advance national interests in Afghanistan.²² These proposals sounded good in theory and existed in line with the philosophy of managerial technicalism but, as Canada found time and time again on the ground, proved lacking in application. As soon as Canada and its allies attempted to innovate on the policy-making side, just as quickly the Taliban responded with new tactics aimed at undermining the Coalition’s efforts. The “nature of the mission changed, because what the Taliban did changed.”²³

When Canada attempted to improve its public diplomacy and direct outreach among the Afghan people, those same innocent civilians suddenly became targets to be exploited and extorted by the Taliban under the cover of night. As the Taliban “adopted their tactics of IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and blowing up their vehicles on the road, in many ways [Canada’s] whole concept of reaching out to people made it too dangerous.”²⁴ Similar thinking led to the advent of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, whereby civilian and military units guided by scores of well-trained experts were meant to operate together in each of the Afghan provinces with the objectives of improving living standards and facilitating institutional development.

It was this model of regional responsibility—where members of the international coalition would commit themselves to a particular Afghan province—that informed Prime Minister Martin’s decision to tie Canada’s destiny with that of Kandahar in the south. It could have been westerly Helmand, with its poppy fields and opium farms, or Uruzgan to the north, but ultimately Canada was transferred authority of the volatile Kandahar Province, bordering Pakistan, on 16 August 2005.²⁵ The assignment was foreboding: to combat the insurgency as it entered its worst phase, to win the hearts and minds of a beleaguered civilian population, and to seal off the porous border that allowed Taliban agents to infiltrate every other sector of the country at the time and place of their choosing. Kandahar was critical not only for the Canadians but also for the entirety of the multinational effort taking place across the territory of Afghanistan. And yet, Canada did not shirk its duties—and neither did it waver from its obligations.

Instability abroad was similarly reflected by instability on the home front. Between 2005 and 2006, a Liberal minority government gave way to a Conservative one under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, producing the first Canadian Parliament to be helmed by a Tory since 1993. In the months and years to follow, Prime Minister Harper stamped his authority on the war, especially as it intensified in Kandahar. It became synonymous with his premiership, as Kandahar went on to enter the exalted realm of Canadian martial history, a site of the nation’s finest military endeavors alongside the reified fields of Kapyong, Vimy Ridge, and Passchendaele. At some point, Afghanistan would well and truly become Stephen Harper’s War.

Mr. Harper Goes to War

The results of that year’s general elections, conducted on 23 January 2006, confirmed the return to power of the federal Conservatives after a gap of nearly 13 years (albeit in the form of yet another minority government). Prime Minister Harper quickly differentiated himself from his Liberal predecessors with a more muscular rhetorical line on Afghanistan and other aspects of Canadian foreign affairs. In reality, the trend toward remilitarization and reinvestment in the languishing armed forces had begun under Bill Graham in his time as minister of defence, but Harper’s Conservatives happily ran with these developments. Within two months of his electoral victory, Harper’s team planned a bombastic surprise visit to Canadian troops in Kandahar, marking his first official foreign trip as head of government.

In the March 2006 speech delivered at Kandahar Airfield, Harper succinctly and robustly clarified Canada’s war aims and rationale for fighting. As he exhorted

the soldiers: “[Y]ou have put yourself on the line to defend our national interests; protect Canada and the world from terror; help the people of Afghanistan rebuild their country.”²⁶ The speech noted that, under the Taliban, “Afghanistan often served as an incubator for al-Qaeda and other terror organizations,” leading to the loss of two dozen Canadians during the destruction of the World Trade Center.²⁷ Here Harper lays the groundwork for the forward security agenda, recognizing that “Canada is not an island,” and “what happens in places like Afghanistan threatens and affects all of us back home in our own country.”²⁸ Finally, and most impactfully, the prime minister places the Afghan mission within the lineage of Canadian external relations, consistent with the state’s core values and principles of conducting foreign policy. Afghanistan became a test of the Canadian way of life and of the ability of Canada to take a leadership role in sharing those virtues with others:

You can’t lead from the bleachers. I want Canada to be a leader. And I know you want to serve your country, a country that really leads, not a country that just follows. That’s what you are doing. Serving in a UN-mandated, Canadian-led security operation that is in the very best of the Canadian tradition, providing leadership on global issues, stepping up to the plate, doing good when good is required. . . .

Of course, standing up for these core Canadian values may not always be easy at times. It’s never easy for the men and women on the front lines. And there may be some who want to cut and run. But cutting and running is not your way. It’s not my way. And it’s not the Canadian way. We don’t make a commitment and then run away at the first sign of trouble. We don’t and we won’t.²⁹

Despite statements intended to rally the forces serving honorably in Afghanistan alongside Canadians following from back home, the expansion of the mission in Kandahar coincided with flagging public support and a steadily increasing death toll. The conditions facing Canadian units in Kandahar were torpid and brutal. The 2006–2008 period saw a “sharp increase in Canadian casualty rates in Afghanistan, as Canadian Forces personnel routinely engaged in combat operations—offensive and defensive—in Kandahar.”³⁰ Among these engagements included Operation Medusa in the fall of 2006, during the Battle of Panjwaii, which has since entered the canon as the largest land battle undertaken by NATO in its history as an alliance. High-visibility (and high-cost) operations such as Medusa led to a dramatic drop in public support,³¹ thereby complicating the task of military planners and Canadian political figures as the insurgency wore on.

The new prime minister was a shrewd operator, and though cognizant of the authority of the Canadian executive office in defense matters,³² he looked at

Afghanistan as a potential wedge issue to advance his caucus's standing in a tightly balanced minority Parliament. The Opposition Liberals were undergoing a contentious leadership race after their general election defeat, and Prime Minister Harper believed that Afghanistan could be used to expose divisions within the Liberal caucus. The Opposition benches were simultaneously flanked by the Bloc Québécois (an antimilitarist and separatist party) and the leftist New Democratic Party. These latter two groups were united in their opposition to the war, leaving the future of the Canadian mission to be decided by the two main traditional parties.

On 15 May 2006, the government announced a surprise debate in Parliament to vote on an extension of the Afghan mission until February 2009. Members of the House of Commons were given only two days to prepare their thoughts for the six-hour, nonbinding debate. In any case, the vote seemed premature to observers, given that the operation was not set to expire for another 10 full months.³³ Before the motion was even introduced into the House, the prime minister announced that he would be extending the mission regardless of the vote's outcome. Requiring a flurry of last-minute lobbying and the backing of a group of moderate Liberal MPs led by former minister Graham, the motion ended up passing by a slim 149–145 margin. While not legally binding, failure to pass the motion could have been a political disaster for the minority Conservatives, possibly triggering a third election in the span of three years. Moreover, the government would have had to explain to NATO allies why it engaged in such a risky and overtly partisan ploy, one that had the potential of derailing Canadian participation in ongoing ISAF operations.

Once the results were made known, Prime Minister Harper offered the following comments: "I'm obviously pleased, the vote was obviously much closer than we thought even 24 hours ago. . . . Support for the mission is a lot stronger than the vote. There were a lot of people in there who just wanted to vote against the government."³⁴ Beyond considerations of the parliamentary balance of power, another explanation for the sudden decision could be that a NATO meeting had been scheduled for the last week of May, wherein the future of the Afghan mission was to be further deliberated. Senior officials in the government revealed that "Canada has been asked by NATO to consider taking over the command of the entire Afghanistan mission in 2008," plausibly informing the reasons for calling the debate so early.³⁵ Either way, the prime minister and his team witnessed firsthand how political gamesmanship held the potential of jeopardizing both Canada's international reputation as well as the stability of the Afghan mission. Having matured from the experience, the prime minister took steps to depoliticize Afghanistan while promoting a new bipartisan consensus on the future of the Canadian commitment.

The result, hailed by analysts as “politically brilliant,” was the October 2007 creation of a five-person panel tasked with assessing the trajectory of the Afghan mission, while also providing recommendations for its continuation after February 2009 (the then–end date of Canadian operations).³⁶ The panel was chaired by respected former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley, thereby undercutting insinuations of partisanship in advance. After all, the Liberal Opposition could hardly argue against a committee steered by one of their own, deliberating on a war that they themselves had led the country into back in 2001, at least not without massively exposing the party to accusations of hypocritical conduct at a time when its image had already taken a severe beating among the public.

The Manley Report, as it was monikered, unveiled several key findings and proposals for restructuring the Afghan mission beyond February 2009. It judged that a combat withdrawal by that date was simply not a “viable option.”³⁷ Furthermore, the report maintained that “the effectiveness of Canada’s military and civilian activities in Afghanistan, along with the progress of Afghan security, governance and development, must be tracked and assessed more thoroughly and systematically,” while recommending that Canada begin transitioning to a less combat-oriented and more training-focused posture to better develop the strength of the Afghan National Army.³⁸ In encouraging the Afghan forces to take on a “greater share of the security burden,” Canada could begin to proportionately draw down its own involvement while Afghan authorities gained skills, technical know-how, and practical war-fighting experience.³⁹ The move toward a more systematic and statistical benchmarking of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan helped remove ideological influences from the decision-making process while fulfilling the numerical expectations of a managerial technical war-fighting style.

The Manley Report gave Canada’s political class a road map to disengagement in Afghanistan with clear markers and milestones that could be adhered to beyond February 2009. For Prime Minister Harper, it was an opportunity to defuse Afghanistan as an electoral issue, even in an environment of perpetual minority rule, so that Canada’s foreign policy agenda would be able to enjoy continuity and support with the buy-in of the nation’s bureaucratic and governing elites. There would be no more partisan crises when it came to Afghanistan, as a March 2008 bipartisan vote (at a 198–77 margin) confirmed with the final extension of the combat mission until 2011.⁴⁰

Harper had managed to successfully depoliticize Afghanistan, gradually incorporating more and more of the planning for the war under the centralized purview of the prime minister’s office. This did not, however, imply that all was well on the home front. As public frustration with the war wore on, and communication from the government faltered, Canada once again found itself vul-

nerable to a set of deep anomic fissures, dividing the nation's citizenry along distinct regional and cultural fault lines that had complicated Canada's strategic mandate for centuries.

Competing Traditions in Canadian Foreign Policy

Much like the Boer Wars and the two world wars of the preceding centuries, the Afghan War reactivated and exposed the cracks in Canada's unitary concept of foreign policy. Though Canadian statecraft traditionally prides itself on upholding tenets of internationalism, liberalism, multilateralism, peacekeeping, and the rule of law in global affairs, the reality is that regionalism continues to dictate Canada's strategic line, particularly when its participation in external conflicts goes on for too long and is perceived as costing too many Canadian lives. This had become the case for Afghanistan as Canada entered the Kandahar phase of the war.

Justin Massie, in a seminal 2008 article, explains the numerous regional "strategic subcultures" that have existed in Canada historically, as well as the ways in which those regional dynamics have gone on to impact the state's use of force in the Middle East at the start of the twenty-first century. "Regionalism," referring to "the politics of territory and place," has manifested in Canadian foreign policy in three distinct traditions identified by Massie: Québécois pacifism, English-Canadian Anglo-Saxonism, and Albertan continentalism.⁴¹ While Canadian confederation does not seem to be under existential threat these days, leaders would have been much more circumspect throughout the 2000s. In the 1990s, Canada had seen national unity strained by constitutional debates at Meech Lake and Charlottetown, culminating in the razor-thin Quebec sovereignty referendum of 1995. That wartime duress might reignite regional divides was a real consideration, one that demanded tactful negotiation by Canada's political class.

In his research of public support for the Afghan War, Massie finds that the clearest disconnect occurs between Albertans and Quebecers regarding the use of force exogenously. From 2001 to 2005, most Canadians were strongly in favor of the nation's participation in the coalition efforts, with a pan-Canadian average of 74 percent approving.⁴² In March 2006, that support experienced a universal drop as Canadian casualties were reported in far greater numbers than was the case previously, coinciding with the shift of operations to Kandahar Province. From 2001 to 2007, the period studied by Massie, a "systematic [negative] gap distinguishes Quebec from the rest of Canada, ranging from 7.3 points in October 2001 to 25.4 in July 2007, for an average of 19.6 points [of deviation]."⁴³ For Albertans, the positive gap in opinions between them and other English Canadians "ranges between 7.2 points in July 2005 to 24.8 in

August 2007, for an average of 12.7 points of difference.”⁴⁴ While attitudes did not systematically diverge across the majority of English Canadian provinces, Massie observed that Albertans were diametrically opposed to Quebecers in their higher support (to the tune of a 20 point average gap!) regarding the use of force internationally, particularly if those operations were to be conducted alongside the US military.

Clearly, divergent regional strategic subcultures impacted Canada’s ability to act with cohesion and oneness in its external affairs, especially given Quebec’s outsized electoral importance and unique sense of cultural distinctiveness. Responsibility for the Afghan War swung between two successive Liberal prime ministers representing Quebec ridings, to the first Albertan prime minister since 1980. Multilateralism and international sanction was not necessarily enough to bridge the gap either: When it came to Afghanistan, Quebecers found themselves in opposition to a war that possessed a strong UNSC mandate and was commanded by NATO; contrast this with the question of Iraq, where “Albertans massively rejected the Canadian government’s decision not to take part in the war against Iraq, a decision justified by the absence of a consensus at the UNSC.”⁴⁵ The astute management of regional cleavages between different Canadian provinces is a hallmark of the nation’s war-fighting history, marked by episodes of great turbulence such as the conscription debates of World War I and World War II, and opposition to participation in the imperial Boer Wars at the turn of the twentieth century. Afghanistan was no different, and future wartime Canadian leaders should have every expectation that similar difficulties may once again arise.

Even when Canada has been able to act as a concerted polity, it has still had to balance competing trends and tendencies in its concept of foreign policy. Among these rhetorical constructions include two kinds of Canadian internationalism, “an active internationalism, supporting the general principle of global involvement and rejecting isolationism, and a more ‘liberal’ internationalism favoring humanitarian causes such as ‘development assistance, a reduction in poverty and inequality, and the protection of human rights.’”⁴⁶ Sjolander argues that this latter variant, as deployed in Afghanistan, had reached the status of a “Canadian brand,” reflecting Canadians’ image of themselves at home and abroad, while assuming a “central place in the construction of what it is to be a Canadian.”⁴⁷ The management of the Afghan War by Liberal and Conservative government therefore also became a question of the management of a cherished Canadian identity. This can be seen by the emphasis on development projects such as dams and schools in addition to Canadian military operations undertaken on the ground.

Yet both the Liberal and Conservative governments oversaw a definitive shift across the duration of the Afghan War, slowly moving away from the humanitarian impulses of Canadian foreign policy of the 1990s toward embracing a more muscular and credible allied standard. Noting that significant underinvestment in the CAF had tarnished its war-fighting potential during the initial stages of the Afghanistan deployment, including small overall troop numbers and a lack of modern equipment, Prime Minister Paul Martin had asked Defence Minister Bill Graham to begin shifting away from the Lloyd Axworthy “Human Security” agenda of the previous decade toward a more active “Forward Security” posture in the 2000s.

Without belittling “what Lloyd did, because he was an extraordinary Foreign Minister,” Graham admits that Canada’s initiatives in the immediate wake of the Cold War were “basically soft power” and that “when there was a problem that required the military support, for a United Nations or other initiative, our military were not in a position to respond to it.”⁴⁸ To restore Canadian leadership in a more uncertain and interventionist international order, where ideas like the Responsibility to Protect doctrine were now commonplace, it had become imperative for Canada to rebuild its operational capabilities. Under both the Liberals and the Conservatives, Afghanistan proved a tremendous stress test for the forward security concept in practice. While Canadians themselves may have felt more comfortable with the language of peacekeeping rather than combat operations, this was perhaps a naive point of view in a world of resurgent threats.⁴⁹ Diplomacy and peace was best undergirded by the demonstration of strength, as Graham himself explains: “We did have to build up our capacity for sure. A country like Canada cannot expect that, if it is going to be a significant contributor to peace and security in the world, if it is only contributing to one dimension of that peace and security. It needs the credibility to project its interests. Maybe we were like an airplane that had two motors on one wing and one on the other . . . it was about balance.”⁵⁰

In balancing these multiple considerations and competing trends in Canada’s storied foreign policy tradition, successive policy makers turned to a philosophy of “managerial technicalism” in their handling of the Afghan conflict. By turning the war over to those mavens deemed best qualified to handle it, leaders in Ottawa were able to shield themselves from accusations of ideologically infused decision-making. Through coordination between civil sector and military expertise under the whole-of-government approach, to the depoliticization of the war on a partisan level, to the highly precise and surgical nature of the operations, actors in the Canadian establishment sought to remove dogma and focus on interests wherever possible when it came to waging the conflict over the course of a decade.

The technical and terminology-laden nature of Canadian participation in the Afghan War will continue to stand out among historians as a defining feature of the nation's intervention there. This will continue to hold true, even as a review of allied successes and failures considering developments in Afghanistan since 2014 might eventually reveal a more mixed record.

Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan

The notion of historical legacy can be ambiguous in even the most definitive and lapidary of circumstances. This is especially so for a conflict as intractable and muddled as that of the one in Afghanistan, with its perpetually shifting alliances and ill-defined parameters. Several truths, however, remain self-evident: that Canadian soldiers fought with dignity and distinction, that the war set the nation's armed forces on to a respectable path earning it the gratitude of its allies and peers, and that the civilian population of Afghanistan did and continues to suffer unjustly under the menace of Taliban rule.

Today, the Taliban gains ground in Afghanistan while the Americans have set a withdrawal date of 11 September 2021, at last nearing an end to its "forever war." As the Taliban movement takes over the administration of vast swathes of the rural countryside, ceaselessly contesting the authority and legitimacy of the elected government in Kabul in the process, some have ominously observed that the Taliban is "no longer just a shadowy insurgency; they are a government in waiting."⁵¹ Despite upbeat rhetoric from officials and military leaders, it is difficult to feel triumphalist or victorious about the Canadian experience in Afghanistan.⁵² Public fatigue had set in long before the last Canadian soldiers arrived home from the training mission in 2014. Afghanistan in 2021 is not a functioning liberal democracy, and Kandahar has since returned to its status quo ante as a major insurgent stronghold. To determine if the mission was a success, it may be worthwhile to revisit the initial objectives of Canadian participation iterated back in 2001 under Prime Minister Chrétien and again in 2006 under Prime Minister Harper.

First, the positives: North America avoided another 9/11-style attack, and Canada did not serve as the staging ground for an extremist assault on the United States; Canada advanced its national interests by developing a more assertive presence on the international stage while going above and beyond to prove its credibility to its American and NATO allies; and last, Western intervention helped curb Afghanistan's vulnerabilities as an incubator of global terrorism. If the purpose of Canadian involvement, however, was to "create an Afghanistan in which women would be free to be doctors and television presenters, a civil society would be developed in Afghanistan, respectful of what we would consider to be

international norms of human rights,” then it is obvious such optimistic intentions have not come about in actuality.⁵³ Likewise, if Western intervention was a delaying action intended to buy time for the training of Afghan forces and the institutional development of the Afghan state, then rampant governmental corruption and regrettable military weaknesses have dashed those hopes too.

The mistakes that Canadian planners made were not uniquely attributable to Ottawa alone and represented shortcomings that every major NATO participant repeated while operating in Afghanistan. These included a poor examination of preexisting regional dynamics among neighboring Iran, Pakistan, and India, particularly regarding the interests these states held in Afghanistan. Western officials have been right to blame themselves for not adopting a more exacting approach toward the Pakistani government, who actively aided and abetted the Afghan Taliban, along with the failure to better cordon off and monitor insurgent movement across the Durand Line. Taliban fighters consistently struck Western interests in Afghanistan before retreating across the border, with the mountains in between serving as a strategic reserve base for the insurgency and its leadership. Minister Graham, echoing the sentiments of other allied authorities since 2014, made the following observations:

It turned out to be more challenging than we had appreciated at the beginning. We should have thought more about the role of the porous border and of Pakistan. The duplicity of the Pakistani government, their support for the Taliban, was unknown to us. You have to be able to close off the area from outsiders. . . .

You say insurgency, but it’s even broader than that. The Pashtun people are on both sides of the border, and if you look at the role of Pakistan . . . President Obama one time made this crazy statement that in order to solve Afghanistan we have to solve Kashmir. What he was saying was that Afghanistan was a factor in the rivalry between Pakistan and India. Anything they can do in Afghanistan that would upset India, they would do.⁵⁴

Greater historical competency and training could have perhaps prevented some of these complications from derailing the mission, but certainly not all. Canada was but one actor in the messy Central Asian milieu, and Western assumptions and expectations were not easily mappable on to the cultural vicissitudes of traditional Afghan life. Only time will tell what exact lessons Canada has learned and will carry forth from the Afghan interlude, particularly as the West prepares to leave Kabul to its fate while turning to face the more fractious grand strategic challenges looming on the horizon throughout the 2020s and beyond.

Conclusion

With Afghanistan, there were never any easy or straightforward answers. That was the case during the active and evolving phases of Canada's involvement, and that remains to be the case now even with the benefits of hindsight. Perhaps that was why it became so impossible to rally the Canadian public and remind them of the noble intentions of the initial "limited liability" intervention. No amount of explaining or exhorting could have made up for the lack of visible and quantifiable results, especially when combined with the bloody toll incurred in human life and treasure. At some point the average Canadian found themselves unable to understand or relate to the strategic aims of the highly technical operation, as it was taken over in an increasingly abstract fashion by Ottawa's self-appointed professional class. The doctrine of managerial technicalism did not prove to be a winning concoction when subjected to fire-testing in the crucible-like conditions of Central Asia.

The Canadian state in all its component parts, including its bureaucratic and political organs, along with the leadership of the Canadian Armed Forces, certainly matured as a result of the decade spent in Afghanistan. The rosy view of post-Cold War life in the 1990s came crashing back to earth as Canadian units were exposed to the vulgarities of combat after a gap of nearly 60 years. War-fighting techniques were refined and reorganized, and CAF soldiers would have undoubtedly gained much experience in conducting modern counterinsurgency operations. The various departments of the government had to learn how to coordinate their functions to most effectively amplify Canada's material capabilities in the service of its foreign policy aims, eventually nearing something close to the much-vaunted whole-of-government ideal.

Over the course of a decade and more in Afghanistan, thousands of Canadians, both enlisted and civilians, touched down on Afghan soil in service of the national cause. Tragically, 165 were never to return. With them, some small corner of a maple leaf will forever and always remain at rest in Kabul and Panjwaii and, of course, among the scraggled hills and sacrificial fields of southerly Kandahar Province, the everlasting site of a young nation's reinvention. ✪

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Notes

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4. Neil Earle, "Foreign Policy and Canadian Commentary on the Afghanistan War," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 39, no. 2 (4 June 2009): 169, 162, 163.
5. Thomas Klikauer, "What Is Managerialism?," *Critical Sociology* 41, nos. 7–8 (2015): 1105.
6. Fillion, "Gen. Rick Hillier."
7. Bill Graham, *The Call of the World: A Political Memoir* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 224.
8. Justin Massie, "Canada's War for Prestige in Afghanistan: A Realist Paradox?," *International Journal* 68, no. 2 (2013): 278.
9. NATO Association of Canada, "A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham on Canada's Afghanistan Legacy," 11 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com>.
10. Christopher Kirkey and Nicholas Ostroy, "Why Is Canada in Afghanistan? Explaining Canada's Military Commitment," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2010): 207.
11. Massie, "Canada's War for Prestige in Afghanistan," 280.
12. "Within a context in which Canada's defence capability had been openly questioned by US policy makers and their representatives (Cellucci, 2001), the substantial participation of Canadian ground troops in the US combat mission might help to mute some of these criticisms." C.T Sjolander, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar: The Competing Faces of Canadian internationalism?," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 15, no. 2 (2010): 83.
13. NATO Association of Canada, "A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham."
14. Sjolander, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar," 85.
15. "We were going *somewhere* in 2003, just as a way to relieve the pressure of saying no to the Americans on Iraq, and it ended up being Afghanistan. But I think now we view the world through a more strategic lens: we have to bring stability to places where there's chaos, to help those areas develop." Fillion, "Gen. Rick Hillier."
16. Massie, "Canada's War for Prestige in Afghanistan," 279.
17. NATO Association of Canada, "A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham on Canada's Afghanistan Legacy."
18. A. Walter Dorn and Michael Varey, "The Rise and Demise of the 'Three Block War,'" *Canadian Military Journal* (2009), <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca>.
19. Senate of Canada, "How Are We Doing in Afghanistan? Canadians Need to Know," *Report of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence* (June 2008), <https://sen.caada.ca>.
20. Senate of Canada, "How Are We Doing in Afghanistan?"
21. "In 2005 the Canadian International Policy Statement first introduced the "3D" approach—involving defence, diplomacy, and development—and presented it as the best way to make a difference in post-conflict situations." Caroline Leprince, "The Canadian-led Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team: A Success Story?," *International Journal* 68, no. 2 (2013): 360.
22. "Make war in the hills and make love in the towns. Provide security, and second but more important part was security in the villages and the enablement of development. That led to the 3D

concept of Defense, Diplomacy, and Development.” NATO Association of Canada, “A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham.”

23. NATO Association of Canada, “A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham on Canada’s Afghanistan Legacy.”

24. NATO Association of Canada.

25. LePrince, “The Canadian-led Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team,” 361.

26. “Text of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Address Monday to Canadian Soldiers in Afghanistan,” *CBC News Online*, 13 March 2006, <https://www.cbc.ca>.

27. “Text of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Address.”

28. “Text of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Address.”

29. “Text of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Address.”

30. Kirkey and Ostroy, “Why Is Canada in Afghanistan?,” 204.

31. Stephen M. Saideman, “Afghanistan as a Test of Canadian Politics: What Did We Learn from the Experience?,” *Afghanistan Papers* no. 10, Center for International Governance Innovation (May 2012), <https://www.cigionline.org>.

32. “Canada’s deeply centralized political structure is well known. The prime minister can, without parliamentary consultation (let alone approval), deploy the Canadian Forces abroad in times of peace and crisis; the power to deploy the Canadian military is an undisputed prerogative of the Canadian executive.” Massie, “Canada’s War for Prestige in Afghanistan,” 281.

33. , “A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar,” 88.

34. Sjolander, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar,” 89.

35. Sjolander, 88.

36. Sjolander, 90.

37. Canada, (*Final Report of the Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan [Manley Report]*) (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services, 2010), 31, <http://publications.gc.ca>.

38. Canada, (*Final Report of the Independent Panel*), 36.

39. Sjolander, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar,” 91.

40. Bruce Campion-Smith, “MPs Vote to Extend Afghan Mission until 2011,” *Toronto Star*, 13 March 2008, <https://www.thestar.com>.

41. Justin Massie, “Regional Strategic Subcultures: Canadians and the Use of Force in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *Canadian Foreign Policy* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 20.

42. Massie, “Regional Strategic Subcultures,” 33.

43. Massie, 34.

44. Massie, 35.

45. Massie, 40.

46. Sjolander, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar,” 79.

47. Sjolander, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Kandahar,” 79.

48. NATO Association of Canada, “A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham.”

49. The Editorial Board of the *Montreal Gazette* put it eloquently: “But if Canada is to be a force for good in the world, it must be a force. Perhaps we need better-armoured equipment for our soldiers, or different tactics. But being in Afghanistan, in our current role, is the right thing for Canada to be doing.” “Canada Is Fighting the Right War: [Final Edition],” *Montreal Gazette*, 6 July 2007.

50. Editorial Board of the *Montreal Gazette*, “Canada Is Fighting the Right War.”

51. Ashley Jackson, “The Taliban’s Fight for Hearts and Minds,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 September 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

52. “Given all this, what can we say about the results of Canada’s military efforts to secure the province? One conclusion, which now appears to be a dominant narrative within the Canadian military, is that Canada’s forces kept the Taliban at bay—specifically, that a relatively small number of Canadian troops performed with distinction on a critical front of the Afghan war by preventing the Taliban from advancing on strategically vital Kandahar City.” Roland Paris, “The Truth About Afghanistan,” *Policy Options*, 3 March 2014, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org>.

53. NATO Association of Canada, “A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham on Canada’s Afghanistan Legacy.”

54. NATO Association of Canada, “A Conversation with Hon Bill Graham on Canada’s Afghanistan Legacy.”

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