

COLUMNS

Published in the Halifax Daily News, Wednesday 30th January 2008

Canada won't renege on commitment Our NATO allies need us in Afghanistan, and the Manley report underscores that point

DEFENCE MATTERS



JOHN BOILEAU

The Daily News



An American armored Humvee patrols in Afghanistan. The Americans could satisfy Canada's call for reinforcements. (AP Photo)

The pontifications of press pundits followed swiftly on the heels of the release of John Manley's report last week. Their opinions were fairly predictable. Those who support Canada's role in Afghanistan have generally praised it, while those who are against the mission have condemned it.

While the report may not have swayed the chattering classes, the great Canadian public treated it with a bit more thoughtfulness. Polls taken immediately after the report's release showed that 49 per cent of respondents said they would now support an extension if the report's conditions for additional support in Kandahar - 1,000 more NATO soldiers, transport helicopters and aerial surveillance drones - were met.

Thirty-five per cent opposed an extension. Overall, 71 per cent rated the report as fair, good or great.

Not in the cards

Only the most chronically naive or utterly unrealistic individuals could have imagined that Manley and his colleagues would recommend that Canada unilaterally pull its troops out of Afghanistan when the present mandate ends a year from now. As a founding member of NATO, that just wasn't in the cards for us.

Canada's place in the world in peace and war has been defined through membership in alliances. The last - and only - time we fought a war by ourselves was the North-West Rebellion of 1885.

Small nations such as Canada have traditionally tried to guarantee their survival by one of two means: neutrality or alliances. Neutrality has its disadvantages. It takes a massive expenditure in armed forces to ensure that another country will think twice before violating that neutrality.

Simply declaring yourself neutral doesn't work. It has the same effect on other nations as declaring your home burglar-free has on thieves. It did nothing to prevent the invasion of several neutral countries during the First and Second World Wars.

Faced with the most obvious shortcoming associated with neutrality - it doesn't work - Canada opted for alliances as a better means of ensuring its continued existence. Four years after the end of the Second World War, this country helped create one of the most successful alliances of all time - NATO.

Some will no doubt scoff at the suggestion, but in reality we owe our existence today to NATO. During the dark days of the Cold War - which defined most of the last half of the 20th century - the only safeguard that stood between the power of the Soviet Union and the destruction wrought by all-out nuclear war was the strength and firm resolve of the alliance.

Canada made a contribution to NATO out of proportion to its size - more than 14,000 soldiers and airmen on the ground and in the air. For many years, we had a mechanized brigade group stationed in Germany that was so powerful the British referred to it as the "light division." At its peak, our air division in France and Germany consisted of 12 squadrons flying 300-odd Sabre Mark 6s, probably the finest fighter jet in NATO at the time.

How successful was NATO? Its existence led to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the death of the Warsaw Pact, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. In fact, many of NATO's former Warsaw Pact adversaries are now NATO members.

Given Canada's relationship with NATO - and an understanding of the importance of the alliance system to our continued security - there was no way the commission Manley led was going to recommend that we simply fold our tents in the night and slink away.

Solemn pledges

Neither this prime minister nor any other - unless in some weird alternative-universe scenario NDP Leader Jack (La-La Land) Layton becomes our national leader - is going to renege on such a major commitment to our allies. These are not playground promises made by school kids; they are solemn pledges between sovereign states.

The United States is the only country that can readily provide the additional troops and equipment. Some have speculated that the recent announcement of the deployment of 3,200 U.S. Marines to southern Afghanistan conveniently fills the troop bill. As it stands now, it doesn't.

The Marines will be gone seven months after their scheduled April arrival - long before February 2009. But as the U.S. commitment in Iraq winds down, American soldiers and equipment could be provided to meet Canada's conditions for staying in Afghanistan.

johnboileau@eastlink.ca

John Boileau helped protect the West from Soviet aggression as a member of Canada's NATO brigade in West Germany between 1967-71 and 1975-77.