

Canadian General Takes Senior Command Role in Iraq

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VANCOUVER, Jan 23 (IPS) - Despite the government's official position abstaining from combat in Iraq, Canada has dispatched yet another top general to the command group overseeing day-to-day operations for the U.S.-led occupation and counterinsurgency war.

Brigadier-General Nicolas Matern, a Special Forces officer and former commander of Canada's elite counter-terrorism unit, will serve as deputy to Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin III, incoming commander of the 170,000-strong Multi National Corps-Iraq beginning in mid-February.

Matern is the third Canadian general to serve in the command group of Operation Iraqi Freedom as part of an exchange programme that places Canadian Forces officers in leadership positions in the U.S. military. His deployment is part of a three-year post with the U.S. Army's 18th Airborne Corps, based out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Officials at Fort Bragg confirmed that Matern has already been deployed to Iraq, though no official statement has been made by Canadian officials.

Meanwhile, 42 Canadian tanks and armoured personnel carriers left Edmonton last week destined for Fort Bliss, Texas to participate in pre-deployment training exercises with the U.S. Army before a summer rotation in Afghanistan. A Department of National Defence press release characterised the training as "massive", with more than 3,000 Canadian soldiers taking part in Exercise Southern Bear.

Such joint exercises are commonplace throughout all branches of the armed forces and beyond. A report from the U.S. Department of State's counterterrorism office described how "the governments of the United States and Canada collaborated on a broad array of initiatives, exercises, and joint operations that spanned virtually all agencies and every level of government."

During his first visit to Washington as Prime Minister in 2006, Stephen Harper boasted that the North American alliance was the "strongest relationship of any two countries, not just on the planet, but in the history of mankind." As much as 90 percent of Canadian trade is with the U.S., with upwards of two billion dollars a day in goods and services crossing the border.

There are also economic interests in Iraq itself. The April 2007 Iraq Reconstruction Report lists Canada as the fourth largest importer of Iraqi oil. Industry Canada records that total Canadian imports from Iraq have risen from 1.06 billion dollars in 2002 to 1.61 billion dollars

in 2006, making Iraq second only to Saudi Arabia as a Middle Eastern source for Canadian imports.

According to Canada's Defence Policy Statement, the increased collaboration with the U.S. military will "not see the Canadian Forces replicate every function of the world's premier militaries," but rather fill niche roles that allow Canada's interventionist capabilities to be relevant and credible.

To this end, Matern's Special Forces background is seen as an asset. "He comes in with a unique set of skills," Col. Bill Buckner of the 18th Airborne told the Ottawa Citizen. "We're the home of the airborne and the special operating forces, so he fits in very nicely to this warrior ethos we have here."

Matern was a commander in the secretive commando unit, Joint Task Force-2, before being promoted to deputy commander of the newly created Canadian Special Operations Forces Command.

Canada's most important foreign policy documents list Iraq, along with Afghanistan, Haiti, Sudan, and Israel-Palestine, as areas of "strategic priority".

Canada was an active participant in the 1991 Gulf War and helped enforce the crippling blockade on Iraq throughout the 1990s, but declined to join the so-called "coalition of the willing" in March of 2003 when the U.S. launched the invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein without a final U.N. resolution authorising the war.

Nevertheless, Canada's contribution to the mission is notable. In 2003, Canada pledged 300 million dollars in aid and reconstruction in Iraq. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police has helped train more than 30,000 Iraqi security forces in neighbouring Jordan, and has had top level advisors operating within the Iraqi interior ministry. As well, Canadian frigates continue to operate alongside the U.S. aircraft carriers in the Arabian Gulf that are a primary staging platform for bombing raids in Iraq.

Indeed, during the first week of the war in 2003, then-U.S. Ambassador to Canada, Paul Cellucci, said that Canada had provided "more support indirectly to this war in Iraq than most of the 46 countries that are fully supporting our efforts there."

Around the same time that Canada opted out of combat in Iraq, it increased its combat role in Afghanistan, ultimately taking command of the counterinsurgency war in southern Afghanistan.

Unlike the Canadian deployment in Afghanistan, which is subject to relatively significant coverage domestically, Canada's participation in Iraq is handled much more carefully by Canadian officials.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay did not return a call seeking comment and no official statement has accompanied Matern's recent deployment.

Opposition New Democratic Party defense critic Dawn Black expressed reservations about the implications of the special military relationship: "We're concerned about an overemphasis on interoperability with the U.S.," she told IPS from her British Columbia office. "It affects whether we have an independent foreign policy and sovereignty as a country."

Though approximately 93 percent of the coalition troops in Iraq are American, the U.S. has long been keen to emphasise the multinational component of a war that former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan described as “illegal”.

Major General Peter Devlin, a Canadian Forces officer currently operating as deputy commanding general in Iraq, recently told the Washington Post that the effect of the multinational element is in bringing “greater legitimacy to the effort here in Iraq”.

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