

War in Afghanistan: Evolving Military Marriage between Canada and the US

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July 2011 and beyond, no country will have been more closely integrated with U.S. President Barack Obama and Gen. Stanley McChrystal's counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan than the Canadians. Shortly after McChrystal took over as commanding general of all NATO and U.S. troops occupying Afghanistan earlier this year, he praised the Canadian Forces for their implementation of "population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN)" in the southern part of the country.

The Canadians have been in southern Afghanistan since mid-2005, where they've operated without the national caveats that are seen to have prevented most NATO contributors from going aggressively after the insurgency.

During a visit last July to an Afghan village, Deh-e-Bagh, where the Canadians implemented a "model village" counterinsurgency approach akin to the "oil spot" approach of counterinsurgencies past, McChrystal remarked that the Canadian-induced results - known in counterinsurgency parlance as 'clear, hold, and build' - "[are] more powerful than any round we can shoot."

Gen. McChrystal is slated to meet with Canadian military leaders this week, following a week in Washington where he testified to Congress in support of President Obama's recently announced "surge" of up to 33,000 troops into Afghanistan. McChrystal will also deliver a speech to a defence lobby think tank, the Conference of Defence Associations, entitled, "The Road Ahead in Afghanistan."

In September, Canada's flagship newspaper, the Globe and Mail, referred to Gen. McChrystal's leaked assessment of the war as constituting "a new strategy that appears to be based on [Canada's] own counter-insurgency efforts."

Last week, in its quarterly report to parliament which measures progress in the Afghanistan war, the government repeatedly praised the "Canadian approach" to counterinsurgency as being "described as the model for ISAF counterinsurgency operations."

Canada's Role in the War

Canada's role in the war has brought it into the inner circle of U.S. allies involved in both planning and prosecuting the effort. In October, it was announced that a Canadian deputy was being selected to join the team of U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke. A member of Holbrooke's team, Vikram Singh, said that a Canadian had not yet been selected to join, but said of the Canadians, "We meet with them regularly," and that they are a "vital" part of the overall operations.

The Canadian war contribution is so enmeshed with the U.S. that the relationship has been referred to by the media as “an evolving military marriage” between the two countries. The diplomatic representative of Canada in Kandahar, Ben Rowswell, told the National Post last week, “We work at full integration,” adding, “We are cheek by jowl...The best way to integrate is to integrate completely.”

Speaking with IPS last month at the Halifax International Security Forum, top Canadian officials discussed how Canadian efforts are being both lauded and emulated by the United States.

Defence Minister Peter Mackay told IPS, “Gen. McChrystal’s report is really, one could say, a stamp of approval; you don’t have to read very far between the lines to recognise that there is an acknowledgement that we’ve done this work.”

Canada’s former Chief of Defence Staff, (Ret.) General Rick Hillier, concurred, calling McChrystal’s lauding of Canadian efforts an “incredible compliment to Canada.” Hillier was the key military officer from 2005-2008 who oversaw the transformation of the Canadian Forces from a conventional military known for its peacekeeping, into an expeditionary, counterinsurgency-capable force that can seamlessly integrate with the U.S. military. Thanks to his efforts, for the first time in its history, the Canadian Army published its own counterinsurgency doctrine in December 2008.

Hillier’s replacement and Canada’s current Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Walt Natynczyk, told IPS that Canada’s successful application of COIN owes to the arrival of U.S. reinforcements in the spring of this year.

“We actually had the ability to do [counterinsurgency] this past spring, as we had the American reinforcement in some areas freeing up the troops, so the troops could then, once they’ve cleared through an area, actually hold it,” he said.

Natynczyk pinpointed Canada’s shift to population-centric counterinsurgency, saying they “started the counterinsurgency approach where we’re able to protect people in April and May. In fact, the day we were really able to implement was the 22nd of May.”

Coinciding with this timeline and calling into question just how Canadian the “Canadian approach” to COIN in Afghanistan really is, during April and May the Canadians and their U.S. counterparts conducted a series of intensive, high-level counterinsurgency-related meetings with Canadian military leaders, think tanks, and political advisers. Led by representatives of the U.S. Army/Marine Counterinsurgency Center at Ft. Leavenworth, the goal of the meetings, according to a report by the commander of the COIN Center, Col. Dan Roper, was to “inculcate [the] Canadian military establishment with COIN doctrine and best practices.”

Established in 2006 by Generals David Petraeus and James Mattis, the COIN Center lists Canada among its key international partners. One of the goals of the frequent meetings between the two militaries is to foster “US-Canada COIN synergy.” A Canadian, Lt. Col. John Malevich, is currently the deputy director of the COIN Center at Ft. Leavenworth, one of a series of officer-level exchanges that foster a deeper relationship between the two militaries. Malevich said in a telephone interview in June, “The exchange is part of bringing

that [counterinsurgency] expertise up to Canada and bringing it into the Canadian military culture.”

Maj. Gen. Peter Devlin, deputy commander of Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, said in Halifax that Malevich’s exchange is an example of the “consistency in thinking between Canada and the U.S.”

Neoconservative Militarism

Jerome Klassen, a professor of politics at the University of New Brunswick and a critic of Canada’s role in Afghanistan, says the shift to counterinsurgency is evidence of a broader shift concerning the “hegemony of neoconservative militarism in [Canada’s] foreign policy apparatus and the attempt by Canada to gain strategic influence in North Atlantic relations.”

“To a certain extent, the war in Afghanistan has been an effort by Canada’s economic and political elite to achieve this goal,” he said.

By hewing so closely to the U.S. counterinsurgency shift, Klassen told IPS via e-mail that Canada is trying to “gain a seat at the table” with the West’s most powerful war-fighting countries “at a time of military failure in Afghanistan and economic crisis at home, both of which are rapidly diminishing the power and influence of Europe and North America in global affairs.”

Marilyn Young, a professor of history at New York University and decades-long critic of U.S. counterinsurgency wars, told IPS that the Canadian counterinsurgency approach, successful or not, is “really limited and the notion that you can oil spot out from [it] I think is delusory.” Young added that framing war in terms of counterinsurgency “softens the image; it makes the public believe something else is happening,” adding that in counterinsurgency war, “force is applied and applied in large measure, whether its population-friendly, which is what McChrystal calls his, or not.”

Chief among those who have attempted to publicly advocate for COIN are Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, as well as spokespeople for prominent think tanks such as the Center for A New American Security (CNAS), which Young calls “a propaganda mill.” Petraeus and CNAS president (Ret.) Col. John Nagl are among a number of influential messengers of COIN who also hold doctorate degrees. Nagl declined a request to be interviewed for this article.

Young quipped to IPS, “And what could be more wonderful than military men with PhD’s? In a country that is as anti-intellectual as this one, that’s just a gift to the military to have this group of brainy warriors. They are a PR man’s dream, all of them are.”

Young cautioned, however, “I think they combine the worst of both professions. The arrogance of thinking you know the answers, with the firepower to carry out your schemes. What could be more terrifying?” •

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