International Terrorism
The Case for Containment

Canadian Defence Forces

Canadian FA–18 Hornets patrol over Mediterranean Sea during NATO Operation *Unified Protector*

By J U L I A N L E W I S

Every generation in a military conflict finds it hard to envisage a different kind of threat. Soon we shall reach the 25th anniversary of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987, which eliminated cruise, Pershing II, and SS20 missiles in Europe. No one imagined then that, within 5 short years, the Soviet bloc would collapse—or that, within 15 years, the main opponents of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would be international terrorists and that Muslim regimes would give them shelter.

A new orthodoxy emerged after the shock of 9/11 and the wars that ensued. Until just 2 years ago, full-scale counterinsurgency

Dr. Julian Lewis is a British Parliamentarian, Member of the United Kingdom Intelligence and Security Committee, and Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London.

seemed the template for the future: in places like Afghanistan, it would continue to apply for a very long time. Yet in 2010, there was a sharp about-turn by Western political leaders who doubted that their peoples would tolerate the casualties and costs for decades to come. Even before the Arab uprisings, the United States opted for a major troop drawdown, and the British pledged to end their Afghan combat role entirely no later than 2014.

We did not predict the Soviet collapse; we did not predict the impact of al Qaeda; and we did not predict the upheavals in the Arab world. It would thus be foolish to try to predict the outcomes of other dramatic events. What we should do instead is consider new concepts and prepare provisional plans for various contingencies. For example, at the time of writing, we simply cannot know whether postintervention Iraq will stabilize and settle down, or whether the bombing campaign after the U.S. withdrawal heralds an escalating conflict and renewed civil war. It is most unlikely that Western forces will re-enter Iraq unless it transforms itself into a direct and unmistake-

able threat to the West's security. Does this mean we should never intervene in a Muslim state for humanitarian reasons? Not necessarily—as events in Libya have shown.

In Parliament last year, I voted for British military action against Muammar Qadhafi, but only with extreme reluctance. This was because, although the threatened massacre of the citizens of Benghazi was thought to be intolerable, my government's proposals seemed inadequate to prevent it. We were asked to approve a "no-fly zone," which, in the normal sense of the term, would have involved denial of airspace to Qadhafi and the suppression or elimination of Libyan anti-aircraft assets. What actually occurred was very different: Western aircraft intervened operationally and tactically in close support of a ground campaign mounted by one side in a civil war. This greatly exceeded the limits of the no-fly zone concept (though not the terms of the relevant United Nations resolution) and for that reason it ultimately proved effective. However, there was certainly no appetite for Western intervention on the ground—and

if Qadhafi's forces had proven too strong for the rebels despite the air attacks, a dreadful slaughter of his opponents would probably not have been prevented.

The future of Iraq remains uncertain, as did the outcome of the Libyan campaign for quite a long period. Though dictators have died in both countries, it is too soon to say if democracies have been born—either there or in any of the other states affected by the so-called Arab Spring. This term is meant to remind us of the Prague Spring when reformers attempted to create "Communism with a human face" in the late 1960s. It is an unhappy comparison: the Czechoslovak reformers were swept away and the people were suppressed for another two decades. Whether the same will happen in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, or Yemen we cannot possibly know. Yet it is beyond doubt that a fanatical brand of fundamentalist terrorism is at large in the world; that it has done us harm in the past; and that it means to do so again if it can. What, then, should our approach be when tackling this threat in this context? Let us first consider why we originally went to Afghanistan.

Focusing on the Aim

When al Qaeda mounted its attacks in September 2001, these did not begin with the hijacking of the four aircraft. Barely noticed in the West was the assassination, 48 hours earlier, of General Ahmed Shah Massoud—an outstanding Afghan leader with impeccable anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban credentials. The timing of his murder proved that the plotters *expected to provoke an invasion of Afghanistan* in retaliation for 9/11; they wanted to eliminate by far the best candidate to lead a post-Taliban government installed by the West.

The assault on the United States was a means to an end as well as an end in itself. Not only was American prestige undermined and its power openly challenged, but al Qaeda also achieved a key strategic aim—forcing the infidel West to arrive in large numbers on the soil of a Muslim country. This was calculated to provoke local hostility to the visible presence of foreign troops. Al Qaeda should actually be viewed as an initiator and catalyst of the conflict in Afghanistan rather than as a prominent participant. It successfully mired its enemies in open-ended conflict with swathes of Afghan society which might never have been mobilized by any other means. For all we know, al Qaeda itself—which uses tiny numbers to disproportionate effect—may currently have little

or no active presence in Afghanistan. *Its strategists achieved their objective by setting NATO countries at odds with a substantial section of a Muslim population.*

Western aims, by contrast, have seldom been presented with this degree of consistency. Direct involvement with a deprived society, after overthrowing its oppressive government, naturally tends to generate new objectives over time, but it is important to recall that there have always been only two sound reasons for initiating NATO's military campaign in Afghanistan:

- to prevent that country being used again as a base, training ground, or launch pad for further attacks against the West
- to help Pakistan, next door, prevent any prospect of its nuclear weapons falling into the hands of al Qaeda or its imitators.

Three further objectives, though desirable in themselves if achievable at minimal cost, are not adequate reasons for our presence in the country:

- the creation of a tolerant democratic society
- the prevention of drug production, which harms consumers in the West
- the advancement of the human rights of its citizens, especially women.

There is a striking difference in the measures necessary to achieve the first two aims compared with the other three. In general, the former can be attempted by a policy of containment, but the latter can be fulfilled only by a full-scale counterinsurgency campaign.

Counterinsurgency versus Containment

When irregular forces use unconventional means to undermine a government, the potential responses fall into one of two broad categories: *micromanagement* of the threatened society, as in Northern Ireland, or *minimal intervention*, as in Iraq in the 1920s. The former—counterinsurgency—is hugely expensive in terms of both blood and treasure. In Northern Ireland, the British were prepared to pay that price for 38 years, despite horrific attacks against soldiers and civilians on the mainland as well as in Ulster. By contrast, no such price would have been acceptable to maintain British Imperial control in Iraq between the wars, so a policy of containment was adopted instead.

Only historians now have much awareness of the Mesopotamia Campaign of World War I. Like the Dardanelles, it was a costly and bloody sideshow. The lowest point came with the siege and surrender of Kut-al-Amara in 1915–1916. When a heavily indebted Britain was given the League of Nations Mandate for Mesopotamia/Iraq in 1920, the army confidently predicted that it could control the country, provided that vast numbers of troops were deployed. Instead, the newly created Royal Air Force carried out the task (and secured its future as a separate service) by using airpower in conjunction with limited land forces, at a fraction of the cost, and with far fewer casualties than any land campaign.

Of course, that sort of aerial policing, involving the punitive burning of villages after their inhabitants were warned to leave, would be totally unacceptable and inappropriate in the 21st century. But the episode is relevant because it illustrates the *principle of containment* which ought to be applied in a far-flung theater where there is too little incentive to incur the costs and casualties of full-scale counterinsurgency. Modern Western countries are ill-equipped to cope with attritional warfare of that sort, particularly when there is no end in sight and each individual loss attracts daily news coverage at home.

If reshaping the threatened country in the image of a modern society, with all its rights, privileges, and standards of living, is the strategic aim, then counterinsurgency is the only option—the war must indeed be fought "down among the people," in the words of the doctrine. Yet one must pause and think long and hard before opting for this model. To embark on such a struggle is to contravene a fundamental principle of effective combat—that, *whenever possible, one must fight on the ground where one is stronger and one's opponent is weaker.* There was never any doubt that NATO would be able to overthrow the Taliban regime, just as later occurred with Saddam Hussein. The problems arose in the aftermath of these initial easy victories when, first in Iraq and more slowly in Afghanistan, insurgents replaced set-piece resistance with guerrilla techniques of sabotage, sniping, and roadside assassination.

NATO has opted for the micromanagement model in Afghanistan—at least, until the end of the surge. Thus, time after time, military patrols issue forth along predictable routes in order to assert ground-level control of the occupied territory. The Taliban are

effectively provided with an endless procession of uniformed personnel to be picked off and blown up at will. NATO, in short, is playing into the hands of its enemies by *choosing a model that provides them with the one lever likely to compel the withdrawal of our forces.* This explains why President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron have both indicated timetables to draw down forces—and in the British case quit—despite the outcome in Afghanistan remaining in the balance. But are they exploring all the options?

Transition to What?

When a version of this article was drafted for private circulation in the summer of 2010, my principal concern was that—in the United Kingdom at least—the military establishment, and the army in particular, were wedded to a model of open-ended counterinsurgency campaigning as the answer to al Qaeda. The incoming Chief of the Defence Staff, for example, had been quoted as predicting British involvement in Afghanistan for the next 40 years. There was much talk of the
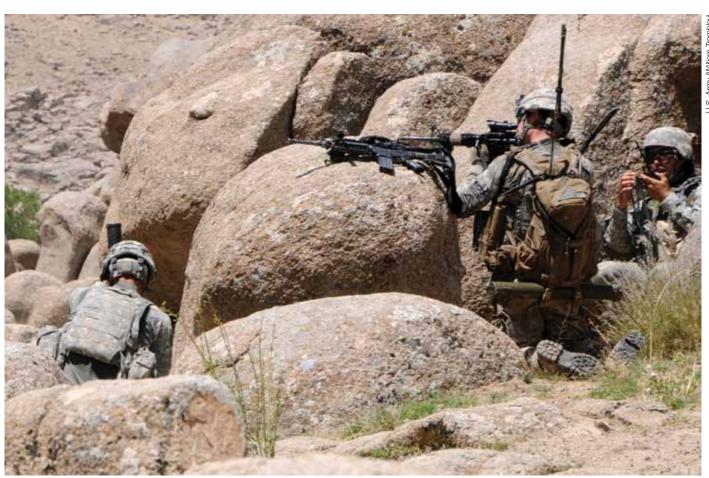
need to prepare for "the wars" of the present (counterinsurgencies) rather than for "a war" in the future (conventional conflict between modern states). Given the unpredictability of future crises, this seemed to be dangerously short-sighted and strategically illiterate. Already, there were signs that al Qaeda strategists were thinking far ahead. A single act of international terrorism had already succeeded in embroiling the United States and its allies in an Afghan morass that had soon become self-sustaining, without the need for further al Qaeda input. It was obvious that Osama bin Laden, or his successors and imitators, could therefore turn their attention to other vulnerable Muslim states.

And what then should we in the West do if such states also became bases, training grounds, or launch pads for attacks against us? Should we invade and occupy each country in turn? Should we apply the costly and prolonged counterinsurgency model to Sudan, or Somalia, or Yemen as well? Or should we recognize that our strategic interests would have to be met by the containment model—in a way

not involving war down among the people, *not* requiring hands-on control of occupied territory, and *not* linking the fate of our campaigns too closely with the fortunes of unpopular or corrupt indigenous regimes?

My concern, in short, was that Western strategy in 2010 seemed determined to restrict itself to the straightjacket of fighting irregular forces by conventional means—that by trying to do too much, NATO would achieve too little. Yet within weeks, the scene had shifted almost 180 degrees, at least in the United Kingdom. An unrealistic commitment to a 40-year campaign was abruptly replaced by an unrealistic commitment to a 4-year transition. The trend seemed similar in the United States, though not spelled out so starkly.

It is not yet clear if American forces will remain in Afghanistan after the drawdown or if their military footprint will disappear as their bases are transferred to Afghan control. From a costly and indefinite commitment, we are in danger of avoiding any commitment at all. It is argued, on the European side of the Atlantic, that the deadlines for withdrawal

U.S. Army (William Tremblay)

Soldier prepares 60mm mortar as Afghan interpreter directs Afghan soldiers to coordinate fire on Taliban forces

British Royal Army (James Elmer)

British Royal Marine commandos take action during Operation *Sond Chara* in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan

are intended to put pressure on the Afghan government to reach a deal with "reconcilable elements" among the Taliban. But what pressure will this put on the Taliban—reconcilable elements or not—to reach a deal with the Afghan government? None whatsoever.

It has become fashionable to declare that "there can be no purely military solution in Afghanistan—there has to be a political solution" and that we must match our "military surge" with something called a "political surge." Certainly, if the United States and United Kingdom begin withdrawing according to a pre-announced timetable, the Afghan government will be forced toward a compromise. The Taliban, by contrast, even if they pretend to acquiesce, will simply wait patiently until NATO has gone before redoubling the insurgency. *There is, therefore, no basis for a deal under the present NATO strategy.* It amounts to little more than a pious hope that a few years of dominance by the extra "surge" contingents will be enough to enable the Kabul government to strengthen its forces sufficiently to survive. If it failed, both

of our strategic interests would remain unfulfilled: once again Afghanistan could be used as a base, training ground, and launch pad for attacks against the West, and we would remain poorly placed to assist Pakistan if the terrible prospect of nuclear-armed al Qaeda militants began to develop seriously.

In the case of Iraq, Western forces entered the country, overthrew its dictatorship, established a fragile democracy—with a degree of local assistance—and withdrew. Meanwhile, in an adjacent country, a fanatical regime with ambiguous links to the new Iraqi leadership was busily developing a nuclear capability. The West looks on, anxious and undecided about the prospect of an Iranian nuclear arsenal. In Pakistan, such weapons exist already, and its government remains susceptible to Talibanization. In Afghanistan, the danger lies in the return of the same Taliban regime that was ousted in 2001. If this occurs, it is hard to perceive any overall benefit to the West from more than 10 years' costly involvement. Perhaps a reinstated Taliban would realize that shelter-

ing and sponsoring al Qaeda had brought nothing but trouble and would resolve not to do so again, but there can be no guarantee of this. NATO, therefore, needs a strategy designed to maximize the likelihood of the Afghan government surviving, but prepared for the prospect of its predecessor returning. If the whole Afghan endeavor is not to prove a gigantic waste of effort, there must be provision for the long-term use of sanctions against states that assist the al Qaeda cause.

Total Withdrawal or Strategic Basing?

The British currently plan to end combat operations completely, while maintaining development and reconstruction teams in Afghanistan. As the Taliban are intent on returning, this would be an extremely hazardous undertaking. The notion that Western work of this sort would be allowed to proceed unhindered is fanciful. The teams would quickly become top targets for insurgent attacks and would soon be forced from the scene. The likelihood that they could be sufficiently protected by

local Afghan forces is low. Keeping them in place without adequate security would be to repeat the error of intervening in ways which play to the enemy's strengths and our own weaknesses.

By contrast, the United States has yet to signal its long-term intentions. Announcing an arbitrary date for withdrawal, as the British and others have done, would reduce the incentive for a negotiated deal. The insurgents would sense that they were on course for victory. *The choice should not be limited to one between continued counterinsurgency and the total cessation of military activity.* In order for there to be any chance of compromise, at least as much pressure must be applied to the Taliban as to the Afghan government—and it must be applied in a way that enables the West to minimize the risk to its own personnel.

There is no necessity for NATO to shift from ground-level and almost total coverage of the country to complete withdrawal in a single step. With the full authority of the United Nations, the Alliance has established a network of military bases within Afghanistan together with the means of supplying them. If we genuinely believe that NATO has brought the Afghan National Army and other security forces to the point where they can maintain their government in power unaided, then the next stage should be a phased withdrawal of Western troops from the country at large into the most viable and best protected of these bases. The time will have come for the exercise of power in specialized and selective ways, rather than by blanket coverage of the entire territory—with all the opportunities that gives the insurgents to inflict piecemeal casualties on NATO forces.

There should be no secret about NATO's intentions. The Alliance should be quite explicit in setting out its position. This would reiterate that only the attacks upon the United States had brought NATO into Afghanistan and that we have no interest in remaining other than to ensure that such attacks can never again be mounted with the complicity of Afghanistan. Transitioning into strategic bases would put to the test the viability of the Afghan government. The longer it survived, the greater would be the reductions in the number of bases and the size of the deployments within them. Withdrawal into the selected bases would remove the constant irritant of a uniformed infidel presence in the towns and countryside, thus reducing Western

casualties on the one hand and the motivation of Afghans to join the insurgency on the other. NATO would be demonstrating its lack of ambition to micromanage Afghan society, but the potential would remain to inflict carefully chosen military sanctions, by whatever means deemed appropriate, in response to any sign of a renewed al Qaeda presence in the country connived at by the Taliban.

It is impossible to know in advance whether or when the Taliban would succeed in replacing the Afghan government—rather than reaching a deal with it—after a scaling-back of NATO's footprint in the manner described. It is also hard to assess whether such bases could continue to be maintained in the country if the Taliban did return to full control of the government. What can be said with assurance is that the prospects of the Taliban's return would not be made greater—and might well be lessened—if Western forces relocated to strategic bases instead of abandoning the country completely as soon as the Afghan National Army seemed ready to take control.

Western policy should not be characterized by an all-or-nothing approach. The threat from international terrorism is an agile one and it needs to be counteracted by flexible means. It is neither possible nor desirable to invade and occupy every country from which a terrorist threat emerges. The number of states where it is practical to wage and win full-scale, long-term counterinsurgency campaigns is necessarily small. Yet means must be found to deter the remainder from hosting, supporting, or even tolerating al Qaeda and its imitators in their midst. The purpose of this article is to plant the seed that part of the answer is the use of strategic bases in appropriate areas to administer sanctions selectively and effectively. **JFQ**