

The Yankees are coming

How will 30,000 more U.S. troops in Afghanistan affect Canada's mission?

Sean M. Maloney

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The U.S. Chinook helicopters from Task Force Wings' 4th Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, clawed for altitude as they departed from Forward Operating Base Ramrod in Maywand district of Kandahar, jammed with American, Afghan and Canadian soldiers. Apache gunships pulled tight turns above, deterring any nearby Taliban from engaging the force. The crews from a detachment of Canadian M-777 artillery pulled the canvas covers off the barrels, checked their ammunition and prepared to drop smoke or high-explosive rounds. The female gunner in one of the Chinooks, her faceplate painted to resemble a pair of bright red *Rocky Horror Picture Show* lips, tested her machine gun with a few short bursts. Her partner, with a smiling Japanese demon painted on his, did the same. In minutes, the aerial force swooped low over the Dasht, a prairie-like area in Maywand district west of Kandahar city, and made its run into western Zharey district just as the sun came up. Involving one of the largest air assault operations in Afghanistan since 2003, Canadian-commanded Operation Jalay was on.

The Chinooks flared in to the landing zone, and the troops poured out as the rear ramp dropped. The helicopters lifted off, showering the troops with dust and rocks. Shouted commands got the soldiers off their feet, loads adjusted, and moving out of the open as quickly as possible. Further east, Canadians from 3rd Battalion, the Royal Canadian Regiment, led by Lt.-Col Roger Barrett, crossed the Arghandab riverbed on foot, while an armoured force from the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) pressed in from the north. The sudden, three-pronged attack shocked enemy leaders. Instead of engaging the Canadian and American force, the insurgents went to ground and tried to get out of the area on foot, abandoning their weapons and caching their equipment—leaving IEDs behind which later killed three personnel.

A larger force of U.S. troops is now on the way to Kandahar province—17,000 to possibly 30,000 troops throughout 2009. But as Operation Jalay showed in March, what has mistakenly been called a “surge,” and simplistically compared to American operations in Iraq, actually started much earlier in the Canadian sector. 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry of the U.S. Army, led by Lt.-Col. Dan Hurlbut, now holds a special place in Canadian military history: it is the first American military unit to operate under Canadian command in Afghanistan for a protracted period. Unofficially dubbed the “Manley Battalion” because it was offered up by the Pentagon in response to the 2008 Manley report calling for more international troops, 2-2 Infantry entered into its special relationship with Task Force Kandahar in the early winter of 2008. 2-2 Infantry was a bit of an orphan at first. Detached from its parent American brigade in Regional Command (East) of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the battalion did not come fully equipped. In a role reversal, Task Force Kandahar found itself helping Americans. The Americans provided the infantry, Canada provided the “enablers.”

Operation Jalay, commanded by Canadian Brig.-Gen. Jonathan Vance and planned by his staff at Task Force Kandahar, was one example of the close co-operation between Canadian and American forces achieved after months of work. I first met Lt.-Col. Hurlbut last year when his staff arrived and was getting oriented. They were going into Maywand district, an area that I had been in previously with the 1st Battalion, Royal Gurkha Rifles. In weeks, 2-2 Infantry was dug in next to their vehicles on the Dasht west of Hutel, waiting for engineers to arrive and construct their new home, Forward Operating Base Ramrod. There was some initial trepidation in the Canadian camp: would these guys try to template Iraq onto Afghanistan? Would they use fire indiscriminately and alienate the Afghan population? Nobody was sure. There was a shaking-out period when 2-2 Infantry was subjected to IED attacks on deployment, but concerns melted away once the battalion acclimatized to Maywand—and to the Canadians in Task Force Kandahar. “I would characterize the issues we had with [Task Force Kandahar] and the Canadian battalions we worked with as normal issues that two different organizations will have,” Hurlbut later said. In other words, no big deal.

2-2 Infantry’s deployment is just the tip of the iceberg. Close on its heels was the insertion of the 3,000-man 3rd Brigade Combat Team from the 10th Mountain Division into Logar and Wardak provinces in January to stabilize the southern approaches to the Afghan capital, Kabul. It’s a region where suicide bombers entered the city via safe-house “rat lines.” As part of their pre-deployment training, staff from the 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry of the 10th Mountain Division, benefited from Canadian “lessons learned.” Their operating area, Wardak province, is essentially in the same state Kandahar province was in 2005, in terms of governance and coordination between the reconstruction teams, military forces, and police forces.

2-87 Infantry's personnel, many of whom have substantial Afghan experience from the early days of the war, realize that the counterinsurgency fight is different this time. Lt.-Col. Kimo Gallahue, 2-87 Infantry's commander, and Lt.-Col. Michael Gabel from 4th Battalion, 25th Artillery Regiment, both emphasize that "we know this isn't Iraq." A host of new programs, including the Afghan Public Protection Force, whereby local Afghans become responsible for their own security working alongside the steadily improving police, are being implemented in Wardak under the scrutiny of 2-87 Infantry and 4-25 Artillery.

But what of Kandahar province? The number of Americans deploying to the Canadian-controlled zone is not yet in the public domain, but the influx is expected to dwarf the Canadian contribution. This poses several problems for Canada. Because Canada historically contributes comparatively modest resources to any coalition endeavour, it generally seeks out roles and missions or deploys unique capabilities that are "salient"—meaning that they impart a combination of influence, prestige and rank to Canada's status within the Western coalitions. That was one reason why Canada deployed to Kandahar in the first place in 2005. Canada maintained "saliency" by holding the line in and around Kandahar in the dangerous days of 2006 and 2007—when the Europeans generally wouldn't come to help, the British were pinned down in neighbouring Helmand province, and the Americans were stretched thin everywhere else.

Prestige is one of those intangible things connected to national pride, particularly for our soldiers who have been fighting, and dying, in Afghanistan. We are in danger of losing our profile with the influx of American forces if Canada doesn't play its cards right. On one hand, the American presence is more than welcome—Canada has been holding the thin red line for several years now. On the other hand, we have to avoid the narrative that Canada screwed up and the Americans are riding to the rescue, one that has started to emerge in some American policy circles.

"Saliency" is not just a military thing. There are reconstruction and development implications as well. Any sizable American force deploying to Kandahar province brings with it an "integrated development capability," a polite way of saying "lots and lots of money." Each American local commander has a Commanders Emergency Response Program fund to spend on development initiatives. American brigades will have a civil affairs company—or in some cases a whole battalion—attached with even more resources. USAID representatives, integrated into American units—unlike the Canadian International Development Agency, which resists co-operation with the Canadian military—will bring even more resources to bear. Then there may be something like our oft-discussed Provincial Reconstruction Team, but operating at the district and community level. Again, Canada has no equivalent.

Being flooded with American military and reconstruction resources poses problems for Canada in the governance realm at the provincial level. Influence in Afghanistan is based on what one brings to the table. Will Canada be able to maintain the same level of influence with the Kandahar power structure once American money begins to flow and contracts are let to Afghan companies to support American activities? The American influx will at the very least dramatically alter the economic dynamics of the province, and the region. Job creation means, ultimately, fewer insurgents, if it is handled properly.

This situation is being played out on a much larger scale in the country. From late 2006, when ISAF assumed control of the bulk of the Western effort in Afghanistan, to the present, ISAF has ruled the roost, with some 20,000 troops in 2006 growing to 51,000 in 2008. There are now 58,000 ISAF troops, of which 26,000 are American. There is also the non-ISAF, American-led Operation Enduring Freedom, which boasts 14,000 U.S. troops. The 2008-09 influx will deposit up to 30,000 more American "boots on the ground," to be split between the two commands. In other words, U.S. forces will outnumber the combined non-American forces by three or four times. It is looking like the pre-2006 days, where ISAF ran one war, and Operation Enduring Freedom ran another. The bulk of new American forces will deploy to the volatile Regional Commands East and South.

The numbers don't tell the whole story, however. Canada has deployed between 1,000 and 3,000 troops, at various times and in various configurations throughout the Afghanistan war. Canada has accomplished a lot with our comparatively modestly sized force since 2001. Our prestige is based on what we have done with our forces, our willingness to run risks that others would not, and it is based on the casualties we have taken.

The list of accomplishments includes: assisting in the destruction of al-Qaeda's training, command, and research infrastructure in Afghanistan (2001-02); the denial of Afghanistan as a safe haven for global terrorism (2001-today); the prevention of another Afghan civil war (2003-04); the disarming and conversion of Afghan militia forces into national security forces (2003-today); protecting national and provincial elections (2004-05); mentoring the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (2005-06); the defence of Kandahar city and its surrounding districts (2006-today); and contributing to the destruction of the enemy leadership throughout southern Afghanistan (2005-today). All of these accomplishments were achieved through the creative use of sparse resources, by Canadian soldiers using their initiative when others would not and by working closely with allies, particularly the Americans.

There is no doubt our joint efforts are having an effect. The insurgents do not like the presence of 2-2 Infantry and the Canadian guns in Maywand district one bit. After a flurry of IED attacks, the enemy has lost any momentum they had along the vital Highway 1 corridor. Lt.-Col. Hurlbut established an outpost on the boundary between Maywand and Zharey districts—its presence has seriously interfered with the flow of enemy weapons and personnel into the Canadian and Afghan operating areas, so much so that insurgent cells constantly complain to their superiors in Pakistan about their lack of resources.

For the third year in a row, the Taliban and their allies remain incapable of mounting large 2006-style conventional attacks in the western districts, let alone into Kandahar city, and are focusing on more classic insurgent methods to control the population, such as community-level intimidation, or on planning more “spectaculars” like the Sarposa prison assault and prisoner breakout of 2008. In Maywand, the insurgents have for the most part decamped. Or, as Hurlbut explained, “The bad guys moved out and now are all in Pakistan, which gives us time to focus on governance and development.” Hopefully, this is the shape of things to come—if the coalition can figure out what to do about the insurgent engine inside Pakistan.

Sean M. Maloney is a professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada and has travelled to Afghanistan regularly since 2003. The author of the upcoming Confronting the Chaos: A Rogue Historian Returns to Afghanistan, he is currently writing a history of Canada's war in Afghanistan.