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Canadian imperialism shaken by US debacle in Afghanistan

Last week's humiliating departure of the remaining western troops from Kabul's "Hamid Karzai International Airport" brought an ignominious end to the two-decade-long American imperialist conquest and occupation of Afghanistan. The US and its NATO allies spent well over \$2 trillion on propping up Washington's puppet regime in Kabul, yet once deprived of Pentagon combat support it collapsed like a house of cards before the Taliban advance. This was because the Afghan masses identified it with all the venality and brutality of the neocolonial subjugation of their country—torture and dragnet arrests; government of, by, and for a corrupt elite; the wanton killing of civilians in drone and other air strikes.

Bitter recriminations have erupted in the US political and military-security establishment over "who lost Afghanistan." In Berlin and Paris, the US defeat in Afghanistan is being marshalled as a fresh argument for why Europe's imperialist powers must expand their military might and gain the means to act independently of and, if need be, in opposition to Washington.

However, outside Washington and Wall Street, the collapse of the Kabul regime has arguably dealt no imperialist ruling elite a bigger blow than Canada's.



Canadian soldiers fire an M777 155mm Howitzer field artillery gun (Image Credit: Wikipedia/Spc. Keith D. Henning Public Domain)

Given Canadian imperialism's dependence on the eight-decade old, Canada-US military-strategic alliance to pursue its own global interests and ambitions, any serious geostrategic, military or economic reversal for Washington would roil it. But if America's Afghan debacle has delivered so smarting a blow to its junior partner to the north, it is because the Canadian ruling class—with the support of the entire political establishment, whether avowedly “left” or “right,” federalist or Quebec sovereignist—was itself heavily invested in the Afghan war.

Over the course of two decades, Canadian imperialism expended vast amounts of “blood and treasure” in waging war in Afghanistan and sustaining the neo-colonial Kabul regime.

The Afghan war was the largest Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) military deployment since the Korean War, and ultimately became its biggest and longest since World War Two. Some 40,000 Canadian troops served in Afghanistan, 158 CAF personnel were killed, and more than 100 subsequently committed suicide. Among the foreign occupiers, only the United States and Britain lost more troops in the Afghan war than Canada. Government estimates place the total cost of the 12-year Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan, which began in 2001 and concluded only in 2014, at more than \$18 billion. Ottawa provided the Kabul regime a further \$3.6 billion in “international assistance” during the two-decade US occupation, with Afghanistan remaining the largest or one of the largest recipients of Canadian aid in every year since 2014.

Reviving militarism and putting paid to the myth of Canada's "peacekeeping" vocation

US imperialism seized on the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a pretext to launch a war in Afghanistan for which plans were already far advanced. Its goal was to stake claim to the immense oil and gas reserves of Central Asia, which prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union had been off-limits to the US oil giants, and to establish new military bases from which to project US power in Asia, above all against Iran, China and Russia.

In joining and assuming a major role in the Afghan war Canada's ruling elite had two aims.

First, it wanted to demonstrate to Washington that Ottawa remained a reliable partner under conditions where American imperialism was unleashing unprecedented levels of military violence around the world in a desperate bid to offset the erosion of its economic predominance. Fears within the Canadian ruling class that China and Mexico were rapidly diminishing Canada's hitherto unchallenged role as America's foremost economic partner were compounded by the actions Washington took after 9/11 to "thicken" the Canada-US border, thereby threatening the enhanced economic ties that had developed under the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement.

Canadian big business and its political representatives also seized on the Afghan war as a means to adopt and overcome popular opposition to a more aggressive and militarist foreign policy. Since the 1960s, successive Canadian governments had cast Ottawa as a peaceful force on the world stage, focused on multilateral diplomacy and its "special vocation" for "peacekeeping." This was always a fraud. Canada was a premier member of NATO and NORAD, a frontline state in the preparation for nuclear war with the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, and readily joined the US-led wars against Iraq and Yugoslavia in 1991 and 1999. The UN "peacekeeping" missions the Canadian Armed Forces led or staffed were all sanctioned by Washington in furtherance of imperialist interests.

But by the early 2000s, with the US intent on establishing a "new world order" and tensions deepening between the major powers, the "pacific" claims that the Canadian ruling elite used to cloak its predatory interests and ambitions came to be seen as a

hindrance. As John Manley, then the Foreign Minister in the Chrétien Liberal government and now the chairman of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, remarked in 2001 at the outset of the CAF's assault on Afghanistan, "If you want to play a role in the world, there's a cost to doing that." General Rick Hillier, who commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2004 then served as Canada's Chief of Defence Staff for three years, was blunter still. "We're not the public service of Canada," he declared. "We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people."

And kill people they did. Canadian Armed Forces personnel participated in the fall 2001 invasion of Afghanistan; fought alongside US forces in southern Afghanistan in early 2002; helped guard Kabul for several years; then as Taliban resistance hardened, fueled by popular anger over the occupation forces' slaughtering of thousands of civilians in air raids and the malevolent character of the US-installed neo-colonial regime, assumed a major role in fighting the US-NATO war.

In 2005, the Canadian intervention escalated dramatically, when Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin agreed to double the troop deployment to Afghanistan to 1,200 and that the CAF would assume command of the counter-insurgency war in Kandahar province, a centre of Taliban resistance. This was part of a quid pro quo with Washington that freed up more US troops to fight in Iraq and was meant to make amends for Chretien's eleventh-hour decision to not join the 2003 invasion of Iraq—although, as George W. Bush's Canadian emissary, Paul Cellucci, would subsequently admit, Canada would do far more militarily to support the US war in Iraq than most members of the "coalition of the willing."

The CAF's Kandahar campaign featured house to house raids, and the capture and detention of "suspected militants." In reality, Canadian troops swept up anybody they came across and brutalized them. In May 2006, the newly elected, Stephen Harper-led Conservative government extended the Kandahar combat operation to 2009. In early 2008, it prolonged it again through 2011, and would continue to deploy hundreds of troops to Afghanistan to train Afghan army and national police forces till 2014.

While Canadian forces engaged in bloody combat and perpetrated war crimes in Afghanistan, the political establishment used the war as the backdrop to promote militarism and reaction, issuing declarations of bloodlust and whipping up of

Islamophobia in the name of the “war on terror.” Meanwhile, the *Toronto Star*’s Rosie DiManno, Christie Blatchford of the *National Post*, and a host of other “embedded journalists” churned out reports celebrating the “valour” and “self –sacrifice” of the CAF. This thuggish imperialist propaganda was aimed at acclimatizing the population to war and, above all, at intimidating the war’s opponents into silence.

In 2007 at a ceremony commemorating the World War I Battle of Vimy Ridge, Harper declared, “Canadians did not go to war then, nor will we ever, to conquer or to enslave.” Canadian soldiers were simultaneously proving him a liar, delivering captives to be tortured by Afghan security forces and committing other crimes which Harper would later stop at nothing to conceal.

As its role in the Afghan war expanded, so did Canadian imperialism’s ambitions, its appetites whetted by the possibility that it could gain access to Afghanistan’s abundant resources for Canadian energy and mining companies. Canada placed more than 15 “advisors” in various offices of the Kabul government, including the office of President Karzai. In an action that attested to the military’s growing reach and power, this “Strategic Advisory Team” (SAT) was established by the CAF, not the civilian federal government. Bragging about the influence they had, Rob Ferguson, one of the SAT’s members, asserted at the time, “No other country is as strategically placed as Canada with respect to influencing Afghanistan’s development.” These “advisors” reported directly to Ottawa, directing Afghan government policy in its dealings with other states, the World Bank and aid agencies. (See: Canada’s colonial-style, “embedded” Afghan advisers subject of bureaucratic squabble in Ottawa)

Canada’s Afghan war crimes and the crisis of Canadian democracy

The imperialist subjugation of Afghanistan entailed horrific, criminal violence. Crimes had to be covered up with lies. For these lies to stand unchallenged, basic bourgeois democratic norms had to be subverted.

In 2009, Richard Colvin, a Canadian diplomat formerly posted to Afghanistan, revealed that from at least 2006 Canadian troops had handed over hundreds of Afghans to the puppet state security services, the NDS, or to American forces, who subjected them to

torture “as standard operating procedure.” This included rape, electric shock, beatings and sleep deprivation.

The extent of these crimes remains shrouded in secrecy to this day, thanks to the sabotaging of their investigation by the Harper Conservative government, on the one hand, and the fecklessness of the parliamentary opposition on the other. Harper prorogued parliament for the second time in a year in December 2009 for the explicit purpose of preventing information discovered by Colvin from reaching the public. When the government was forced to release documents pertaining to the CAF’s mistreatment of Afghan detainees, in response to the Speaker’s ruling that it had violated parliament’s core constitutional rights, it conducted a massive document dump and otherwise took steps to subvert a serious investigation. (See: [Canada’s military seeks to cover its tracks following damning report on Australian war crimes in Afghanistan](#))

The Tories’ brazen cover-up was facilitated by the connivance of the opposition parties, who agreed to farm the issue out to a specially vetted committee with only limited access to the documents and whose members were legally barred from say anything about their contents without the consent of the government, senior bureaucrats and the military.

The reality is that none of the parliamentary parties wanted the truth about Canadian war crimes to see the light of day. The Liberal Party, having launched the Afghan bloodbath, continued to support the brutal occupation throughout. The Quebec sovereignist Bloc Quebecois was also a full-throated supporter of the Afghan war, as it has been of all Canadian imperialism’s foreign interventions since its founding in 1991, and joined with Harper and his Conservatives in exploiting it to promote Islamophobia.

The trade union-backed NDP, which voted in favour of the war but uttered rhetorical criticisms of the conflict from time to time, showed where its loyalties really lay in the fall of 2008, when it agreed to serve as junior partners in a Liberal-led coalition government committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011. The coalition was ultimately aborted because Harper, supported by the most powerful sections of Canadian capital, staged a constitutional coup, shutting down parliament, via prorogation, to prevent the opposition parties from exercising their right to bring down the government.

On August 27, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh issued a statement lamenting the “heart-breaking loss of life” and calling on the Trudeau government to work with its “allies” in “support of peace, women, and security in Afghanistan.” Yet the NDP, like the Canadian imperialist bourgeoisie it serves, has a highly selective concern for “women’s rights” and “peace.” It was, after all, this very same NDP that voted unanimously in 2011 to back NATO’s savage air bombardment of Libya, an operation that claimed tens of thousands of civilian lives. The top Canadian military commander of that mission frankly acknowledged that Canadian fighter jets functioned as “al-Qaida’s air force.”

This savage record of Canadian imperialism is a taboo subject in the current federal election campaign. To discuss Canada’s real role in the wars of the past quarter century would expose the responsibility it shares with the US and its European NATO allies for the destruction of entire societies and promotion of Islamist forces that have produced disaster for the peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East. Even the Taliban, which is now pilloried by the entire Canadian political establishment as beyond the pale, emerged out of American imperialism’s criminal use of the Afghan people in the 1980s as cannon fodder in its drive against the Soviet Union—operations which entailed mobilizing and arming Islamist forces, al-Qaida included, and which Ottawa fully endorsed.

The determination of all the establishment parties and the corporate media to cover up Canada’s war crimes in Afghanistan, and its decades-long record of imperialist savagery and criminality is not just a matter of burying past crimes. It is part of the preparation for new ones.

Leading strategists for Canadian imperialism are already penning op-eds and policy papers arguing that the “lesson” of Afghanistan is that Canada must become more active and aggressive on the world stage. Bemoaning the US retreat from Afghanistan, Hugh Segal, former chief of staff to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, argued in an August 24 *Globe and Mail* column that Canada must seek to lessen the impact of American “caprice” by “exapand(ing) the size of our military” and “combat deterrence” against “potentially hostile powers such as Russia, China, Iran or North Korea.”

Canada’s ruling elite is intent on maintaining the fiction that the Afghan intervention was motivated by a fight for “democracy” and the protection of “women and girls” because these threadbare arguments will be required to promote further imperialist aggression in

the not-too-distant future. In this regard, one only needs to point to the incessant anti-China propaganda campaign in the Canadian media and political establishment, which portrays Beijing as a threat to the “liberal world order” and serial violator of “human rights” and “freedom of speech.” Irrespective of which party or coalition of parties holds power after the September 20 election, Ottawa is committed to lining up squarely behind the Biden administration’s bipartisan diplomatic, economic, and military-strategic offensive against Beijing, an offensive whose logical culmination is a catastrophic global conflagration.

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