

Why We Need to Be Peacekeepers

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This month, UN peacekeeping turns 50. Canada, which played such a large role in its creation, will remain (the Harper government is now fond of reminding us) *at war*. If opinion polls are any indication, this is not what most of us want. For growing numbers of Canadians, Canada is on the wrong mission in Afghanistan.

This is painfully evident not only in the disproportionately high numbers of dead and wounded soldiers returning home, the mounting civilian casualties, the obvious difficulties of the growing insurgency in southern Afghanistan, and our failure to provide adequate aid and development to the Afghan people. It is also evident in our virtual incapacity to contribute to resolving conflicts in other areas of the world (such as Darfur and the Middle East) and, most importantly, to contribute in ways that are more in keeping with the role Canada should perform -- namely, that of peacekeeper.

Despite claims to the contrary, UN peacekeeping is far from irrelevant. In fact, it's in greater demand than at any time in its 50-year history. The numbers over the last 15 years alone attest to it. In 1991, the number of military personnel of all nationalities assigned to UN peacekeeping missions stood at 10,801. This year, it's at an all-time high of 66,786, and experts say we need many more. Over the same 15-year period, the number of UN peacekeeping missions increased from 11 in 1991 to 16 in 2006. And far from being ineffective, the increased numbers of personnel and UN-led missions have been credited with contributing to a marked decline in the overall number of conflicts worldwide.

If UN peacekeeping missions have proven to be both effective and in greater demand, consider Canada's contribution over this same period. In 1991, Canada was among the top-10 contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, with 1,149 military personnel assigned to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide. Today, writes defence analyst Steven Staples in "Marching Orders," a new report published by the Council of Canadians, the 56 Canadian soldiers assigned to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide "could fit on a single school bus."

This change has not occurred by accident or neglect but by deliberate choice -- a choice made by our government despite overwhelming evidence both of the effectiveness of modern peacekeeping missions and the desire of most Canadians that we continue to undertake them. (At last count, 69% of Canadians considered peacekeeping "a defining characteristic of Canada.") What the current mission in Afghanistan and the recent transformation of our armed forces reveal is a shift to make Canada's military something it should not be -- something much nearer to an auxiliary force of the United States.

The hawks both inside and outside government are quick to argue that Canada must show Washington it is pulling its weight. The federal government has aggressively advertised to politicians and the public in the U.S. our robust role in combating the War on Terror. Rarely, if ever, does the government speak of our obligations to UN peacekeeping. Yet as recently as February 2005, the conservative U.S.-based Rand Corporation declared UN missions to be "smaller, shorter, and cheaper and, at least among those studied, more successful than the American efforts...."

It needs to be said, there is nothing in either the conflict in Afghanistan or in our relationship with the United States that renders Canada's military or foreign policies inevitable. These are after all matters of democratic choice - what in theory we fought previous wars to secure. Canadians are deeply skeptical of the U.S.-led War on Terror. Many would likely be alarmed if they understood how closely our political leadership has already integrated Canada's military policy with that of the U.S.

More importantly, peacekeeping needs Canada. In New York University's *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations*, editor Bruce Jones recently warned of a looming crisis if countries don't contribute more peacekeeping troops.

Canada should immediately answer the call and set itself the goal of once more being among the top-10 contributors of military personnel to UN operations within five years. Not by coincidence, this would only require the rededication of the current number of troops deployed in Afghanistan (2,300) to UN missions.

Yes, Afghanistan must be freed from the conflict in which it is currently locked and in which Canada is now complicit. But Canada must also be freed of a military policy that is far more likely to exacerbate and even create conflicts in the world than to resolve them. A negotiated peace in Afghanistan and a UN peacekeeping mission sound more promising for the future than our current mission. Canadians support our troops; it's the war with which we have a problem.

It's time Canada return to an independent path that's in keeping both with Canadian public opinion and that respects our obligations to the international community. Canada needs to keep the peace.

John Urquhart is Executive Director of The Council of Canadians. "Marching Orders: How Canada Abandoned Peacekeeping and Why the UN Needs Us Now More Than Ever" by Steven Staples is available for download at www.canadians.org.