

**You Can Check Out Anytime You'd Like:  
Comparing the Dutch and Canadian 'New' Missions in Afghanistan**

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**Abstract:** This paper compares the politics and decision-making of the two major contributors to leave the international effort in Afghanistan: Netherlands and Canada. Strikingly, even though the missions were quite unpopular at home, both countries deployed new missions to Afghanistan, focusing on training rather than combat, in 2011. Thus, these two countries tried to get out of an onerous commitment but found themselves continuing to be involved, despite significant costs in both political and material terms. I compare the two "Early Departers" to assess the dynamics of both departure and return to figure out how domestic and international politics interact in multilateral military interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> I am moving this summer to become the Paterson Chair in International Affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa, with contact information to be figured out.

*Just when I thought I was out... they pull me back in.* Godfather 3.  
*You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.* Hotel California, The Eagles

Until President Obama announced both a surge in troops and a starting point of mid-2011 for withdrawing American troops, only two countries had set definitive deadlines on their combat missions in Afghanistan: the Netherlands and Canada. Other countries have had to renew legislative mandates for their mission on a regular basis, such as Germany, but only the Dutch and the Canadians seemed intent on leaving before the rest of the alliance. It is more than just a little ironic that two countries that have a military history together found themselves in a very similar situation: being the first major allies to try to leave Afghanistan yet subsequently embroiled in domestic debates about continuing the effort via other means.

In both countries, political processes set time limits on operations in some of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan. Canada moved its commitment to Kandahar in 2005 (Stein and Lang 2007), and the Dutch deployed to Uruzgan in 2006—two provinces in what became Regional Command-South. In each case, the mandate for the mission was passed by their parliaments even though the formal constitutions of both countries did not require such a process. In each case, extensions eventually became political impossible.

The Dutch were the first to pull their troops out of Afghanistan, a process largely but not entirely completed by January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Canada has a July 2011 date for ending combat operations and withdrawing from Kandahar by the end of 2011. The similarities continue in the arena of domestic politics as well, as in each country, a new mission was proffered by opposition parties and then picked up by the minority government. While Canada and Netherlands are not usually compared for all kind of reasons, it makes do so here since despite their differences. By juxtaposing these two *Early Departers*, we can assess some of the key dynamics within countries and from outside that make it very difficult to stay in difficult missions such as ISAF but also make it very hard to leave.

First, I address the selection of these two cases. Second, I delineate the gyrations of the Dutch effort in Afghanistan. Third, I consider the key points of the Canadian commitment to leave Kandahar. Fourth, I compare some of the key similarities and note a few important differences. I conclude with some implications for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, for the two countries, and for larger debates about alliances and domestic politics.

## **Canada and the Netherlands: A Natural Comparison?**

Ordinarily, we would not be comparing these two countries. Usually, scholars compare Canada to Australia and the Netherlands to Belgium and other small European countries. Nature or reality provided this comparison, as the Netherlands and Canada were the first significant troop contributing nations (TCN's) to withdraw their combat forces from Afghanistan. . However, to figure out what we can learn from juxtaposing these two countries, we need to consider how similar and how different they are. Since the outcomes are the same, leaving Southern Afghanistan and then returning with a police mission, we would optimally want to characterize the two countries as being most different to facilitate a "most different" comparison (Meckstroth 1975; Mill 1970).

However, the two countries have many commonalities as well as contrasts. Among the key distinctions, during the relevant time frame, Canada had a minority single party government whereas the Netherlands had a coalition government that relied on various parties for support to

stay in power. However, both governments were right-leaning with the Conservatives governing in Canada and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy [VVD] and Christian Democratic Alliance [CDA] in the Netherlands. Both have relatively small militaries with mostly peace-keeping experience. Both suffered embarrassing military misfortunes in the 1990's: Canada disbanded its Airborne Regiment in the aftermath of the beating death of a Somali in 1993 whereas the Dutch government fell in 2001 after the release of the report on the fall of Srebrenica in Bosnia with the Netherlands forces standing by. Both countries agreed to be deployed to southern Afghanistan in 2005-06, but the Canadian decision was made behind closed doors (Stein and Lang 2007) while the Dutch dithered in public for nearly a year. Both deployed to Southern Afghanistan, but the Canadian effort was far more "kinetic" as it covered more space by itself and faced much more contestation, producing six times as many casualties.

So, the cases are perhaps not the best selection for social science—it will be difficult to delineate the key causes since the cases are really neither most similar or most different. Perhaps in revisions, I can figure out how better to set up this up.

### The Dithering Dutch

The decision to return to Afghanistan in 2011 was quite similar to the initial decision to deploy to Uruzgan: lots of dithering with no certainty about the decision until the parliamentary parties made up their minds. The process essentially lasted from May 2005 to the end of the year when the Dutch parliament finally received the document, an Article 100 letter, specifying the mission (Hazelbag, 2009:266).<sup>2</sup> In the debates, there was some confusion about the nature of the mission: combat or reconstruction (Dimitriu and de Graaf 2010). The process produced much conflict between and within some of the key parties but ultimately passed with the support of Liberals, Christian Democrats and Labor Party and with the D66 leader leaving the party. The commitment was for two years, which meant a renewal debate in 2007 to extend the mission to 2010. The renewal debate was far less heated. It did lead to two years of speculation about another renewal.

The stage was set for a political battle in 2010. The Labor party had indicated that it was going to oppose an extension. It was, therefore, surprising that Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende even pushed the issue. It may very well be the case that the Labor Party strategically used the issue to break up the government to force new elections. In any case, the parties could not agree to continue the Uruzgan mission, leading both to the departure and new elections. The new election produced largely similar results—right-wing minority coalition government, relying on various parties for support for key votes.

In the aftermath of the election, the new government faced criticism that it had let the Afghanistan issue slip, with opponents pushing for a new mission to keep the Netherlands credible at NATO and maintain some of the political capital gained via the Uruzgan effort.<sup>3</sup> These opponents were challenged when the government proposed a new mission—to send police trainers to Kunduz. This mission was explicitly not going to be involve combat, although it did

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<sup>2</sup> The Article 100 process was a product of the Dutch experience in Bosnia. The government must tell parliament exactly what the mission is, how it is supported, why it is justified, with much interaction between government officials and parliamentarians to produce a letter that will get enough support. Key Dutch caveats can be found in the Article 100 letter, although how the Dutch control their troops on the ground is more complex than just the contents of the letter. See chapter six of Auerswald and Saideman (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Cite

involve the deployment of a squadron of F-16's (more on that below). The key aspects of the proposed mission:

- located in Kabul and Kunduz, far away from the previous Dutch effort in Uruzgan;
- designed to be only police training, to support the Germans whose own caveats make police training especially challenging (Saideman 2012);
- allowed to go outside the wire as Police Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams [POMLTs] in Kunduz;
- filled a key hole in the NATO requirements;
- included 125 soldiers, including medics, for logistics, support—the national support element;
- deployed Four F-16s plus support staff in Mazar-e-Sharif for IED detection and emergency protection but not for pre-planned combat missions.
- scheduled to end in mid-2014.

The F-16's are perhaps the most interesting component, as one ordinarily does not include fighter planes in a police mentoring mission. The planes are a product of the Dutch experience in Bosnia. When Srebrenica was about to be overrun by the Bosnian Serbs, the Dutch peacekeepers called on air support from NATO. Because of an awkward dual key arrangement with the UN, the air support never materialized. The Bosnian Serbs not only took over the safe area but executed around seven thousand Bosnian Muslim men and boys while expelling the women and girls. In 2001, Netherlands released a report on the Srebrenica mass killing, which caused the Dutch government of the day to collapse. In addition, it resulted in a set of lessons learned, including ALWAYS bring your own air support. If the Dutch trainers come under fire in Afghanistan, the F-16's are there to help, even if NATO refuses to provide air support.

Another striking part of this is that the F-16's are caveated—they can do IED-detection and they can provide emergency support but they are not allowed to be used in planned missions. This restriction is not that limiting, since planes aloft may respond to calls for help, which means that they are likely to be supporting offensive operations more than the parliament expects.<sup>4</sup>

Srebrenica produced a second lesson—that for the Netherlands to send troops abroad, an Article 100 letter would have to be submitted to parliament specifying the mission, what it entails, what the risks might be, and why it is justified. I happened to be in The Hague in January 2011 when the Article 100 letter for the police mission was being considered.<sup>5</sup> During that week, there was great uncertainty about whether the mission was going to be approved or not.

Members of the international community, experts on Dutch foreign and defense policy,<sup>6</sup> and members of the military all were unsure. During the week the new mission was being considered, interested parties considered the situation "volatile."<sup>7</sup> Why? Because the Christian Democrats and the Liberals could not get enough certain support ahead of that week. The

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<sup>4</sup> The Minister of Defence Statement on the mission is quite clear about this, including the need for approval of any combat missions by the Dutch commander on the ground.  
[http://www.defensie.nl/english/latest/news/2011/02/02/48178398/Parliamentary\\_support\\_for\\_Kunduz\\_police\\_training\\_mission](http://www.defensie.nl/english/latest/news/2011/02/02/48178398/Parliamentary_support_for_Kunduz_police_training_mission), accessed March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> My focus that week was on learning about the politics and process of the Dutch deployment to Uruzgan and was planned before it was clear when the police mission was to be assessed.

<sup>6</sup> I participated in a roundtable at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Defense Attache from a NATO country, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

xenophobic Party for Freedom maintained its isolationist stance, so the most ideologically compatible party once again was not willing to provide the needed votes. The Labor party, having broken the government the previous year, was not going to support the minority governing coalition. So, the center-right government had to depend on votes from fickle smaller left-winger parties: D66 and Groenlinks who had proposed this police mission in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Both went back and forth all week long, as divisions within each made it hard for either to reach a definitive decision until the very last minute. Groenlinks used to be anti-NATO, but both parties sought to be seen as legitimate participants in governing coalitions. Supporting NATO was seen as a key ingredient in being perceived as a responsible party. In the negotiations to get the motion supported, the parties sought to make sure that the police training would not be used to train paramilitaries to do combat.<sup>9</sup> The Groenlinks leader Jolande Sap, ultimately chose to side with the minority coalition to support the mission, provoking much conflict within her party.

### **Hotel Canada: Prime Minister uber alles**

The Canadian process highlights how powerful the Prime Minister is, even in a situation of minority government. The Canadian departure from Kandahar and the new "Kabul-centric" training mission indicates that Harper wanted to help out NATO as long as it did not endanger his chances of winning a majority in parliament, which he successfully achieved in May 2011.

Like in the Netherlands, minority government ruled Canada during much of the Afghanistan mission. After Liberal Paul Martin deployed the Canadian Forces to Kandahar, he lost power, leaving the Afghanistan challenge in the hands of Stephen Harper. A key difference between the Dutch and the Canadians is that the latter do not have a consistent process nor a set of agreed rules for what is necessary to deploy troops abroad—no Article 100 process. Harper did push through a quick vote to extend the Kandahar mission from 2007 to 2009, taking advantage of the fact that the Liberals were not so distant from their own responsibility in this deployment.

The renewal of the mission again in 2008 to extend from 2009 to 2011 was far more difficult, essentially determining the end of the Kandahar deployment. The Liberals had begun to oppose the Afghan deployment, arguing that there was far less development and reconstruction than expected. With the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democratic Party [NDP] consistently opposing the mission throughout the decade, Harper needed to split the Liberals to get enough votes to get a mandate passed by parliament. While there is no formal constitutional requirement to have such resolutions,<sup>10</sup> Harper needed a majority of parliament to support the mission or risk a collapse of the government. While the Bloc, the NDP and the Liberals did not agree on much and could not form a coalition, they had the potential to bring down Harper if he pushed too hard.

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<sup>8</sup> Groenlinks and D66 raised suggested the police training mission in April 2010 in the aftermath of the departure decision. I am grateful to personnel at the Canadian embassy in the Netherlands for providing some excellent background information on the dynamics of the Dutch political process.

<sup>9</sup> This ultimately led to a controversy between the Dutch and NATO since there seemed to be little training to do of non-combat police, leading to the Dutch pulling some of their trainers out. "NATO Perplexed by Dutch Kunduz Decision," Radio Netherlands Worldwide, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011, <http://www.rnw.nl/english/bulletin/nato-perplexed-dutch-kunduz-decision>, accessed March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The question of whether the resolutions in 2006 and 2008 set precedents has not been resolved.

So, Harper cleverly enlisted a senior Liberal who had been relatively pro-war, John Manley, to head a commission that would investigate the various options: transition to training and begin withdrawal of troops in 2009; focus on development and governance and let some other country provide the main military effort in Kandahar; move the Canadian effort somewhere else in Afghanistan; withdraw. The Panel rejected all of these options, recommending a more comprehensive approach that tied together the military and civilian sides of the effort, contingent on provision of helicopters and drones to reduce the dangers to the troops posed by improvised explosive devices and contingent on getting some additional troops to support the Canadian Forces in Kandahar. The panel did not recommend a specific date to end the mission, but did mission for more visibility in the mission: signature projects and better reporting (Panel 2008).

These conditions set the terms of the debate in the spring of 2008: extend or not, with a greater focus on governance and development, which would satisfy the Liberals (or at least take away one of their key complaints).<sup>11</sup> In the course of the debate, the parliamentary motion included language that would end the mission in 2011. The Manley Report had been clear that there was no consensus yet about when conditions would be suitable for a handover to the Afghans, but the resolution did put a time limit on the mission. Once this resolution passed with enough Liberals supporting the Conservatives on this one vote, Harper had an answer for the future of the mission—to the middle of 2011 and no longer. He even said that after the mission ended, there would be no Canadian troops in Afghanistan except those to guard the embassy (Brewster 2011).

Harper used the 2008 extension decision as a shield against any consideration of an additional extension even though he could have tried to argue that conditions on the ground did not meet expectations. Instead, he mostly tried to avoid the mission, as he knew full well that the mission was costing him votes, preventing him from gaining a majority. So, it was most surprising that Harper decided in November 2010 to send a training mission to Afghanistan after the end of the combat mission in Kandahar. Harper had previously resisted Liberal calls to consider exactly such a mission.<sup>12</sup> He made the decision over a weekend without apparently seeking the advice of either Minister of National Defence Peter MacKay or the Chief of the Defence Staff Walt Natynczyk.

The new mission, of trainers and support staff, would be around nine hundred troops and focused on training the Afghan troops. The trainers would be deployed to Kabul. The problem was that NATO did not have a requirement for such troops—that there were not seven hundred slots open for trainers in Kabul.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, NATO needed embedded trainers that would go out with the Afghans into combat, but this was exactly what Harper did not want to do. So, the mission became “Kabul-centric” with some Canadian Forces deployed elsewhere in Afghanistan—Herat, Mazer-e-Sharif—but not southern Afghanistan. There would be no return to Kandahar, and the mission was strictly defined to be behind the wire—a caveat imposed on

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<sup>11</sup> The other Liberal criticisms had been that Canada was overcommitted to this one mission, precluding peace operations elsewhere such as Darfur or the Mideast and that Canada should have been rotating in and out of Afghanistan. I had an interview with Paul Martin on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007 in Montreal that flummoxed me as these seemed to be rather lame complaints.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell Clark and Bill Curry, “Harper’s Turnaround: PM Says He Felt He Had to Extend Afghan Mission,” *Globe and Mail*, November 12, 2010, <http://m.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harpers-turnaround-pm-says-he-felt-he-had-to-extend-afghan-mission/article1795989/?service=mobile>, accessed March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> While at various NATO headquarters in January and February of 2011 interviewing officers about other aspects of the Afghanistan effort, it was abundantly clear that the new Canadian training mission did not fill existing holes in the Combined Joint Statement of Requirements.

the Canadian Forces by Harper. The mission would not need a vote in parliament since it did not involve combat, and met the Liberal demands for a post-2011 investment in Afghanistan. Harper did not change the mission once he gained a majority in parliament.

Harper seems to have been responding to US and NATO pressure to keep Canada in Afghanistan. What Harper decided to do did not really add much to NATO's effort although it did allow the US to re-deploy some of its forces from these classroom training assignments to combat. It also helped NATO paper over the violation of "in together, out together" of the Dutch and Canadian withdrawals from Regional Command-South. No other major NATO country followed the precedents set by these two countries. Talk of quickening the pace of transition and withdrawals has been developing but more in reaction to events in Afghanistan than in response to the Canadian departure.

## Comparisons and Contrasts

Both countries left earlier than their NATO and non-NATO partners (Australia is still in Uruzgan), but felt compelled to return. In both cases, opposition parties that had been ambivalent about the mission recommended continued participation but with lower risks: training anywhere but Southern Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> In each case, continued combat was not possible due to the interaction of previous extensions with time limits with minority government.

**Table 1: Contrasting Key Aspects of Departure and Return**

	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Canada</b>
<b>End of S. A-Stan Mission</b>	Coalition Collapses	Minority Government
<b>Source of New Mission</b>	Opposition Proposes	Opposition Proposes
<b>Where</b>	Not Uruzgan: Kunduz	Not Kandahar: Kabul
<b>Doing What?</b>	Police Training, Outside the Wire	Training the Trainers, Inside the Wire
<b>NATO Requirements</b>	New Mission Fits NATO Requirements	NATO Requirements to change to fit new mission
<b>Extra, Extra</b>	F-16's!	Large numbers
<b>Parliament</b>	Heavy role: Article 100	Miminal

Strikingly, the Dutch chose a somewhat riskier deployment—mentoring the Afghan police meant not being restricted to base. Canada reversed a recent change in deployments as the Canadian Forces had been restricted quite significantly in how it conducted its operations before 2005 (Saideman and Auerswald 2012). Now behind the wire, Canada would no longer be engaged in combat.<sup>15</sup> Two key differences stand out: the Dutch lessons from the past meant deploying more capability than needed (F-16's) and the Dutch parliament played a far heavier role. Harper was able to make this decision with little input from anywhere (including his own

<sup>14</sup> Actually, Eastern Afghanistan probably would not have been approved by the opposition in either country.

<sup>15</sup> Well, excluding when the bases where Canadians reside or the conveyances they ride to move from one base to another come under attack

ministers), although he designed the new mission to address complaints from the one party whose support he required—the Liberals.

So, what can we learn from this comparison? Clearly, NATO matters in two very powerful ways. First, prime ministers in both countries felt a great deal of pressure bearing the onus of the first countries to depart from combat positions. We cannot get into the minds of leaders at this moment, but Harper's back-tracking on a repeated vow not to send any more troops to Afghanistan is quite striking. It send a strong signal that despite the domestic political risks of reversing his decision, he felt a need to respond to NATO's requests. Harper came up with a number and a mission that would symbolize a recurring Canadian commitment to NATO yet minimize the risk to the troops and to his standing. He was able to take advantage of the Liberal demands for a new mission to insulate himself from the domestic downside and insure that he didn't need another difficult parliamentary battle.

Second, NATO matters in the domestic politics of its members, as parties need to be NATO-friendly enough to be perceived as legitimate parties. In the Netherlands, Groenlinks leadership saw that it had to follow through on its recommendation for a follow up mission. They apparently did so because they wanted to demonstrate responsibility to the Dutch people so that it could be a viable alternative and not just a wasted vote. Similarly, in Canada, the Liberals, always seeing themselves as the party of Canadian multilateralism, tried to use the Afghanistan issue to paint Harper into a corner, pushing a new mission to maintain Canada's relationship with NATO. Ultimately, the Liberals got out-played by Harper, but the point remains that the Liberals sought to portray themselves as the better interlocutor with the international community and especially the Atlantic alliance.

## Conclusions:

"In together, out-together" was a phrase often used in the early 2000's, as members of NATO promised not to leave the Balkans prematurely. This was finessed when NATO handed over responsibility for Bosnia to the European Union, which then allowed the US and Canada to remove their forces. In Afghanistan, there is no such re-packaging to cover up two of the key contingent providers leaving before the others. Instead, they could assuage the guilt by returning with more modest, less risky mission. Multilateral warfare puts leaders between allies and ambivalent publics. Politicians have chosen a variety of means for handling such challenges, including imposing restrictions on the troops; standing in front of the mission and talking about it; hiding from the mission; and altering the mission to answer or stifle domestic opponents. Two-level games are hardly new to International Relations scholars, but the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century alliance warfare make it clear that the games are hardly fun at all for the leaders (Putnam 1988).

Afghanistan has been a particularly tough campaign since leaders cannot point to visible signs of progress to show what has been accomplished. Canada tried to address this with the development of signature projects, but building and fixing fifty schools has little do with actual progress on the ground. The alliance has faced significant hurdles in communicating with the various publics about what is being accomplished.

What can we learn from this experience? Well, NATO has already learned some lessons. For instance, NATO has been far less clear about which countries did what in the Libyan effort,

making it easier for politicians to deny that their pilots caused civilian casualties.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it is harder to cover up mistakes with "secret sauce" in a ground campaign, but the alliance is more focused now than before on minimizing national responsibility for mistakes. Aside from NATO, we have learned that opposition parties ought to be careful what they criticize. If they accuse the government of not doing enough in support of an international effort, they will be in an awkward position when the government decides to follow their advice. "Be careful of what you ask for." Indeed. Decision-makers will need to take more seriously the very high probability that a multilateral mission will go on far longer than they hope or expect. Stopping a mission or getting out of one that is on-going can be very difficult, with Canada and the Netherlands being dragged back in.

In 2012, the reality is that all members of NATO as well as the partners (Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, etc.) are eager to leave. The fig leaf of transition has been established. Afghanistan will not be ready to defend itself by 2014, but the politicians in the democracy will be finished with defending the mission to their audiences at home.

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<sup>16</sup> C.J. Chivers, "NATO's Secrecy Stance," *New York Times*, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/sunday-review/natos-secrecy-stance.html?\\_r=1&smid=tw-nytimes&seid=auto](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/sunday-review/natos-secrecy-stance.html?_r=1&smid=tw-nytimes&seid=auto), accessed March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012.