

5-13-2017

A mission to Mali is already a lost opportunity, so let's focus on Afghanistan's 'forgotten war'

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Citation of this paper:

Simpson, Erika, "A mission to Mali is already a lost opportunity, so let's focus on Afghanistan's 'forgotten war'" (2017). *Political Science Publications*. 246.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/politicalsciencepub/246>

A mission to Mali is already a lost opportunity, so let's refocus on Afghanistan's 'forgotten war'

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Published May 12, 2017 • Last updated May 12, 2017 • 4 minute read



Article content

Canada's chastened defence minister, Harjit Sajjan, should refocus peacekeeping missions on Afghanistan, rather than Mali.

Instead of sending soldiers under the United Nations to destroy ISIS in Mali, he should send professional, combat-capable forces and reservists to help train Afghan soldiers and police forces so that humanitarian and security operations in that war-torn nation successfully continue.

Canada's elite Joint Task Force 2 went to Afghanistan in 2001, followed by other Canadian soldiers based in Kandahar. They joined American and British troops already fighting to topple the Taliban regime, eliminate terrorist operations and establish schools and institutions bent on creating lasting peace in the troubled country.

The UN authorized the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003 and Canada initially contributed more than 700 Canadian Forces members stationed in Kabul and the surrounding area. In 2005, Canada went back to the Kandahar region, coinciding with a resurgence in Taliban activity, and the number of Canadian soldiers increased to approximately 2,300 taking part in large-scale offensives against Taliban forces.

Sajjan has apologized for glorifying his role in one of those offensives. By all accounts, he performed admirably in Afghanistan, and although he was not the "architect" of Operation Medusa, as he claimed, among Trudeau's choices for cabinet he remains the one with the most impressive wartime, boots-on-the-ground experience.

As the war in Afghanistan became increasingly unpopular, Canada's combat role ended in 2011 and the focus shifted to training Afghanistan's army and police force. But Canada's participation in the UN peacekeeping operation was abruptly abandoned in 2014, under Stephen Harper's government, due to domestic pressures and political expediency. The last of our service members left the country in March 2014.

For more than 13 years, the Canadian Forces operated in and were well-equipped for a theatre of war in Afghanistan. Now Canada should re-engage with that war-torn country, rather than join another UN operation on a different continent in a primarily French-speaking milieu.

In Mali, Canadian forces would be expected to join with France, which has a permanent 3,000-strong anti-insurgent operation in Africa's Sahel region. Pockets of extremist militants do exist in the desert and northern provinces of Mali, but these groups have neither targeted nor threatened specific Canadian interests.

Canada's goal these days should be to attain a seat on the UN's Security Council, therefore we need to commit UN peacekeeping troops somewhere, and soon.

UN diplomats expected Sajjan to commit to Mali. Instead the Department of National Defence sought to delay the decision until it had a chance to consult the new Trump administration. "We will ensure that our troops have the right mission, mandate, training and equipment in order to mitigate risk and maximize our impact," said spokesperson Jordan Owens.

Despite reports that the UN is disappointed by the Trudeau government's decision to postpone a decision on Mali, Canada can still take the initiative on UN peacekeeping.

The UN put out requests to a handful of top-tier countries in mid-December as the term of the Mali mission's previous commander, Danish Maj.-Gen. Michael Lollesgaard, came to an end. Sajjan said he wanted to talk to his American counterpart, Defence Secretary James Mattis, before Canada sent peacekeepers to Africa because co-ordination with the U.S. was essential.

According to reports from the Canadian Press, it now looks like Canada may have missed a chance to provide the commanding officer for the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali because Canada wanted to talk first to the Trump administration.

Rather than belabour the missed Mali opportunity, Sajjan should refocus on finishing the UN's job in Afghanistan. The Taliban's resiliency and the emergence of ISIS are resulting in significant territorial losses and casualties among Afghan National Security Forces. Since the Canadian withdrawal from Kandahar province, the Taliban and affiliated groups have overrun the districts and villages that our forces secured and rebuilt. Nowadays, it is a common scene to witness Canadian taxpayer-funded school projects in Panjwahi district operate as madrasas — colleges for Islamic instruction — administered by the Taliban.

While Afghanistan has been dubbed “the Forgotten War” by academics and journalists, Sajjan surely has not forgotten the situation will only get worse so long as the Taliban and ISIS are allowed to operate with nearly complete impunity. The withdrawal of NATO coalition forces from Afghanistan has further deteriorated the security situation over the last three years so that the current administration of President Ashraf Ghani only controls 57 per cent of Afghanistan's territory.

The Canadian government has not completely abandoned Afghanistan from a humanitarian perspective. But given the dire security situation and declining morale of Afghan National Security Forces, providing the Afghan government with a mere \$165 million for economic development and reinvigoration of the education sector is a misplaced use of meagre funds.

Sajjan's approach to Mali should waive the option of military intervention and take a more humanitarian and advisory approach.

But returning to Afghanistan in order to ensure long-term stability will require more direct involvement using Canadian personnel, and possibly increased numbers of reservists, to help train Afghan soldiers and police.

If the defence minister takes the initiative and recommits to Afghanistan, Canada won't have dissipated 13 years of taxpayers' money. In the name of the lives of 158 members of the Canadian Forces who were killed serving in the Afghan war, Canada should retake the lead in protecting Afghanistan's nascent schools and institutions.

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