

THE PEACEKEEPING BLUES

On 24 March 2006, the Canadian Forces (CF) closed out *Operation Danaca* – Canada’s contribution to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights since 1974 – and transferred Canadian responsibilities to a contingent from India. The 191-person Canadian contribution ‘comprised the majority of the UNDOF 2nd Line Logistics Battalion providing general logistics support to the mission, as well as vehicle maintenance, military police and communications specialists for the force.’ A four-person Canadian contribution remained for an interim period, subsequently reducing to two personnel in July 2006.

Comparatively little noticed, the March ceremony on the Golan Heights was also rather anti-climatic. Some might argue that the decision to withdraw from UNDOF – a decision pre-dating the arrival of Stephen Harper’s Conservative government – was inevitable, given ‘the high demand for personnel with specialized skill sets’ and the numerous other demands, most notably those in Afghanistan, upon the Canadian Forces. Perhaps, too, there is a logical point at which peacekeeping commitments of multi-decade duration, as in the case of the Canadian contribution to the UN force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in the early 1990s, should be relinquished in favour of participation by other UN members. It is, nevertheless, supremely ironic that the withdrawal from the Golan Heights – which reduced the Canadian military contribution to UN peacekeeping to fewer than 60 personnel at a time when the UN fielded some 65,000 military peacekeepers and observers – should come mere months prior to the 50th anniversary of the creation, with very important Canadian diplomatic and military participation, of the seminal United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) during the Suez Crisis of 1956. The remaining Canadian Forces personnel are attached to a comparatively large number of UN operations (thereby proving that even one- or two-person penny packets can look impressive on DND peacekeeping maps), but fewer than 60 members constitutes by far the smallest Canadian military contribution to UN peacekeeping since the inception of UNEF.

This is not to suggest that the decision to decamp from UNDOF was inherently imprudent, but it does raise questions about the failure to participate meaningfully in another UN mission, and hence about Canada’s broader commitment to UN peacekeeping (however defined), about the place of peacekeeping – even frustratingly romanticized peacekeeping – in the Canadian

national psyche, about the extent to which operations in Afghanistan should dominate Canada’s overseas commitments, and about the ability of the Canadian Forces to undertake new UN operations. It might also raise questions about the relationship between public perceptions of peacekeeping and the somewhat tepid public support for the current Canadian role in Afghanistan.

It could be posited that the absence of a broadly-based media and public backlash over the withdrawal from UNDOF – and to Canada’s extremely low ranking on the list of military contributors to UN peacekeeping – provides further evidence that Canadians are adopting a more mature and realistic approach to ‘peacekeeping’ and increasingly understand that peacekeeping, as traditionally defined and practised, can no longer be the litmus test for Canada’s credibility on the world stage. For too long, notes Sean M. Maloney (*Policy Options*, September 2005), Canadians have embraced a mythologized and romanticized vision of peacekeeping: “Are not all Canadian military personnel ‘peacekeepers’? Has UN peacekeeping not been the stock in trade for Canadian soldiers since Lester B. Pearson invented peacekeeping in 1956 during the Suez Crisis? Isn’t our national identity based on the fact that we do peacekeeping while others fight wars? Are we not morally superior because Canada engages in peacekeeping? Will we lose that moral superiority if we engage in operations other than peacekeeping?”

The process by which Canadians so quickly and so deeply transformed peacekeeping into a defining element of their collective self-image is at once fascinating, disconcerting, predictable and puzzling. In many ways, the elevating of peacekeeping to cult status was anything but surprising. Peacekeeping was useful (although not always in ways understood or appreciated by Canadians), comparatively inexpensive (at least during such halcyon years as 1956-1966), and so clearly on the side of the angels. Indeed, as Lieutenant-Colonel D.J. Goodspeed’s centennial year history of the Canadian Forces observed in 1967: “It is suitable and satisfactory that [Canada’s armed forces] should be serving now in a variety of distant lands, still making their country’s name and flag known and respected, but contributing not to the making of war but to the keeping of peace.” Although frequently exaggerated in the cause of Canadian nationalism (some would suggest Canadian smugness), peacekeeping also helped to distinguish Canadians from their American cousins.

That said, it is intriguing that the cult of peacekeeping so frequently prevailed over the skepticism of Canadian prime ministers. John Diefenbaker and Pierre Trudeau were often reluctant peacekeepers, the former because of peacekeeping's Pearsonian/Liberal roots and the latter because of his perception that peacekeeping reinforced an exaggerated and delusional Canadian self-importance on the world stage. Brian Mulroney, although ultimately an enthusiastic peacekeeper, devoted far more attention to defence industrial and related issues than to peacekeeping in his government's ill-fated 1987 white paper on defence. Even the perceived Canadian 'father' of peacekeeping, Lester B. Pearson, was far more realistic than most Canadians about the utility of, and the prospects for, peacekeeping.

Jean Chrétien proved a most ardent peacekeeper, but his unwillingness to match rhetoric with resources, and his references to peacekeeping as a 'Boy Scout' – type activity, were not helpful. Indeed, if Canadians were slow to grasp the dramatic changes to 'peacekeeping' in the post-Cold War era, a substantial measure of blame must be attached to Ottawa's post-1989 reluctance – at numerous political, bureaucratic and military levels – to jettison the old language and symbolism of 'peacekeeping' and its marked lack of candour in acknowledging, let alone interpreting, the scale of Canadian casualties in the Balkans, and such watershed events as the Battle of the Medak Pocket.

If Canadians are now adopting a less naive interpretation of 'peacekeeping' and, concomitantly, a more sober and pragmatic understanding of contemporary stabilization missions, that is most welcome – although one suspects that the mythology of peacekeeping is far too deeply entrenched in the national psyche to disappear anytime soon – but it does not necessarily follow that

Canada's virtual disappearance from UN missions is wise or prudent. The UN's recent peacekeeping record is very far from perfect, but there are missions of merit that could benefit from Canadian capabilities and Canadian expertise. This does not suggest an attempt to recreate the golden era of peacekeeping – when any hint that Canada might forgo participation in a UN mission was treated as a national disgrace – but does suggest that selective, prudent and meaningful participation in UN operations could serve a useful purpose – both in broader humanitarian and geopolitical terms and in terms of Canada's own national interest. If current military capabilities are too stretched to assume a broader UN role – and if Afghanistan continues to consume a very high percentage of available resources – then a logical response would be continued expansion of the Canadian Forces. Privatizing our way back into UN peacekeeping has its attractions (and its proponents), but at best is a supplement to, and not a replacement for, military personnel. UN missions in which Canada could contribute capabilities and resources of types not required in Afghanistan could prove particularly attractive.

There is another danger inherent in a wholesale rundown of Canada's commitments to the United Nations. If Canadians come to believe, rightly or wrongly, that UN commitments have been sacrificed in order to free up resources, directly or indirectly, for operations in Afghanistan, it could have a negative impact on public support for the Afghanistan role. In this context, additional attention to UN missions could add to the insulation of Ottawa, and the Canadian Forces, from accusations of a single-minded obsession with Afghanistan.

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