

Politics by Other Means?

By Nic Boisvert

An old colleague in the Army used to opine that there are only about a dozen countries in the world that really “work” – the United States, Britain, Scandinavia, parts of Western Europe, Australia, Israel and Japan. Until this past month, the list was reasonably presumed to include Canada. That is debatable after the May 2005 spectacle that witnessed the buying of votes and obstruction of Parliament in a fashion more typical of Zimbabwe or that brought on the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. Sadly, the constitutional shenanigans came to entangle the Canadian Forces; worse, the Canadian public sat back and accepted it.

To borrow from Clausewitz, the employment of military forces by the state is, fundamentally, “politics by other means”. By that, however, the noted German strategist did not mean the employment of the military for internal political purposes. No, we have not yet reached the level where the government is turning armed troops against its citizens, but there has been a perilous descent over the past decade in the willingness of the government to use the Canadian Forces for crass political advantage. Prime Minister Chretien had no compunction in shifting the blame onto the CF for his personal preference not to interrupt a skiing holiday to attend the funeral of the King of Jordan, humbling the then Chief of Defence Staff into declaring there were no Challenger jets available when that was not the case. Now just recently, the present prime minister announced the despatch of 60 unarmed support troops to the Darfur region of Sudan, one of the most dangerous places on earth, in a naked attempt to shore up his tenuous minority by garnering the vote of an Independent Member of Parliament for whom that region is a special concern.

This time, at least we were spared the CDS appearing on national television to back up the prime minister, so the precise level of support within National Defence Headquarters is unknown. We may never find out, because the whole scheme was cut short by the Sudanese government, which observed that it was not interested in the presence of any non-African troops within its borders. Quite pointedly, it had not invited Canadian assistance.

Thank goodness for that. If the mission had led – as it predictably would – to the death or injury of even a single Canadian soldier, it could have provoked within the Canadian Forces a crisis of confidence in our political leadership with dangerous implications for a functioning democracy. Responsible adults on all sides of this issue would be advised to take the present lull as an opportunity to bone up on Samuel P. Huntington’s classic treatise, *The Soldier and the State*.

There are many other troubling aspects to this case. To begin, it speaks to the fact that Canada is susceptible to the arrogance we prefer to ascribe to other states (read, the United States), that western powers can just barge about into other countries without their consent, on the paternalistic premise that we know what is best for them. Darfur is an undisputed tragedy, but sometimes the definition of a failed state can be in the eyes of the beholder. It is only a matter of degree (true, a large one, but not unreasonable) to question

how we would feel if African Union troops were to have reacted to the October Crisis of 1970 by coming uninvited to the aid of Québécois being rounded up indiscriminately under the War Measures Act. Even if one agrees with the concept, what then of the passionate call by clear-thinking Keith Martin, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, that we exercise our responsibility to protect Zimbabweans – a situation where Canadian intervention could still make a difference. One might ponder whether the prime minister's failure to demonstrate leadership on this issue belies a soft spot for Robert Mugabe's style of government.

For another, even if Canada could get the UN Security Council to agree that Sudan is a failed state (unlikely, as China and France have significant oil exploration interests in Sudan), there is the larger problem of what can reasonably be achieved to lasting effect. As many are so quick to point out, the United States is encountering great difficulty in bringing Iraq into the functioning world. France has been despatching its Foreign Legion about the neighbouring countries of its former Central African colonies for extended periods and in larger numbers than presently envisioned for Darfur with little noticeable positive effect.

And then there is the fact that, although the Army claims to have recovered from the gruelling operational pace of the past decade, the support troops earmarked for the possible Darfur mission are precisely the engineering and supply trades in highest demand for any overseas mission. Those trades are still desperately undermanned, and are unlikely to be sustainable on a long-term operation. If they were sent and then quickly withdrawn, could a future government accept the optics of abandoning its African partners?

Finally, the whole supposition that 60 Canadian troops would have added the required expertise to an African force several thousand strong is based upon the self-congratulatory myth that our troops are worth more than those of most other countries. As Joseph Stalin famously remarked, "quantity has a quality all its own"; this undoubtedly would be the case in Sudan, where civil unrest is endemic and the Darfur region alone is the size of the province of New Brunswick. The notion that any forces – white or black – in such modest quantities could make a difference against determined hostile local militias that enjoy the support of the national government is delusional.

Yes, Canadian Forces can make a difference, in the right situation, with the support of capable allied partners. Our soldiers, sailors and airmen accept their duty is to enact the desires of our political leaders, but those desires must be legitimate and assured of a reasonable chance of success in consideration of all the risks. Democracies rightly accept constitutional limits to the use of their militaries. If the CF is to lend robust credibility to our diplomacy abroad, we cannot allow it to become a political plaything at home.

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