

Canada's Ongoing Involvement in Dirty Wars

By [Michael Skinner](#) CCPA Monitor <http://www.policyalternatives.org/publications/monitor/canadas-ongoing-involvement-dirty-wars>

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The U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) published its latest of many reports last February, indicating that the United States has increasingly relied on Special Operations Forces to project force abroad throughout the Global War on Terror. The latest CRS report predicts this trend will continue.

New to this latest CRS report, however, is a recommendation that the U.S. should outsource more covert military operations to foreign militaries to reduce the U.S. military budget.

"Special Operations Forces (SOF) are elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified." -- Congressional Research Service, February 2013.

Days after the CRS presented its report to Congress, U.S. Admiral Bill McRaven, commander of the combined U.S. Special Operations Forces, arrived in Ottawa to pitch a formal alliance among foreign Special Operations Forces.

Canada's four Special Operations Forces units already routinely participate in joint operations with their "Five Eyes" counterparts. The Five Eyes are the intertwined military-security complexes of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

American and Canadian Special Operations Forces are already joined at the hip, so it is unimaginable they can become more intimate. McRaven's pitch was really aimed at the leaders of less-closely aligned states, both within and outside the NATO alliance.

Canada's four SOF units

Yes, Canada has not just one, but four Special Operations Forces units. Most Canadians likely know of Canada's Joint Task Force-2, and recognize its acronym, JTF2. The government activated JTF2 in 1993 to replace the RCMP Special Emergency Response Team.

It is probably not as well known, however, that in 2006 Canada added three more units: the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR), which is similar to JTF2; the Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit – Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CJIRU-CBRN), which is an incident response team; and the 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (427 SOAS), which is a covert air force solely dedicated to supporting the other three units.

Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM), currently headed by Brigadier-General Thompson, commands all four units.

Some observers speculate that Canadian Forces may yet add a fifth Special Operations Force unit similar to the U.S. Navy Seals to specialize in maritime missions.

The covert nature of SOFs

The commander of CANSOFCOM is accountable only to the Minister of Defence and the Prime Minister, not to Parliament. Even the U.S. President does not possess such arbitrary

power.

Canada's Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence complained in 2006 that the one Special Operations Force unit then operational – JTF2 – was "shrouded in secrecy."

"Extraordinary units are called upon to do extraordinary things," the Senate Committee report conceded. "But they must not mandate themselves or be mandated to any role that Canadian citizens would find reprehensible. While the Committee has no evidence that JTF2 personnel have behaved in such a manner, the secrecy that surrounds the unit is so pervasive that the Committee cannot help but wonder whether JTF2's activities are properly scrutinized."

But the Harper government, instead of lifting this "shroud of secrecy," has increased its opacity.

It is a reasonable argument that concealing information from an "enemy" protects Special Operations Forces personnel and insures they can achieve the objectives of their missions. In practice, however, a Prime Minister can use the secrecy of Special Operations Forces to hide controversial foreign policy decisions from public scrutiny. The shroud of secrecy, supposedly designed to hide information from an "enemy," deprives Canadians of the information we need to hold political leaders accountable for their actions.

The members of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence raised concerns in 2006 that Special Operations Forces could "take it upon themselves to play by their own rules" without scrutiny. But the Committee members showed little concern for the Prime Minister's ability to order Special Operations Forces to play by his rules, without scrutiny and without regard for international laws.

A Canadian Prime Minister can arbitrarily deploy Special Operations Forces to invade another country illegally, as we saw in Afghanistan in 2001; or to ally with war criminals, as we also saw in Afghanistan; or to abduct a democratically elected leader of another country, as we saw in Haiti in 2004.

Without any institutions of public scrutiny, we can only speculate where else Canadian Prime Ministers have deployed Special Operations Forces.

The Senate Committee reported: "There have been unsubstantiated rumours of JTF2 operating in a number of foreign locations. And that is the problem. Canadians do not know where our JTF2 is operating, under what authorities, and under what rules of engagement,"

From Pakistan to Peru, credible observers allege that Canadian Special Operations Forces may have engaged in operations that range from targeting drone attacks to violently suppressing popular protests against Canadian oil and mining companies.

Training missions might seem like innocuous exercises of altruistic foreign policy. But we know this is not the case from the U.S. history of dirty wars during the decades since World War II.

A powerful state pursues its own interests when it trains foreign Special Operations Forces – sometimes with horrific consequences. Without any public scrutiny, for example, a Canadian Prime Minister can deploy Special Operations Forces anywhere to train foreign soldiers, police, and security agents.

The U.S. plans to cut its military expenditures by outsourcing training missions formerly conducted in expensive facilities like the infamous School of the Americas. And Canada will bear some of the costs.

Costs of covert warfare

The way mainstream media described U.S. Admiral McRaven's visit to Ottawa, you might think -- as the Associate Press reported -- that the "appetite among the governing Conservatives to become entangled in foreign military missions, post-Afghanistan, is all but gone." You might also think that, even if the government does have an "appetite" for expeditionary missions, impending military budget cuts render such expeditions impossible. But both assumptions are preposterous.

Written by Joan Russow

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 07:38 -

The military budget cuts proposed in Canada are merely a fraction of the military spending increases successive Liberal and Conservative governments ratcheted up throughout the Global War on/of Terror. Between 2001 and 2012, the Chrétien, Martin, and Harper governments increased Canada's annual military budget by \$30.9 billion.

In his official military budget review, written in 2012, retired General Andrew Leslie proposed cuts of \$1 billion per year for two years. Leslie claims the excessively fat administrative "tail" of the military can be cut without affecting its "teeth."

Canada, which is the 10th or 11th largest economy in the world, is also the 12th to 14th largest military spender, according to sources ranging from the CIA to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Iran – the country Prime Minister Harper claims is the "world's most serious threat to international peace" – is the 25th or 32nd largest global economy and the 25th largest military spender. Canada's military spending is more than three times that of Iran.

Rather than citing actual spending, proponents for increasing military budgets typically cite statistics of military spending measured as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP). However, Canada's high GDP makes Canada look like a low spender in comparison with countries like Oman and Qatar that top the military spending list as a percentage of GDP. Even Afghanistan's military spending appears greater than Canada's using this measurement. Iran, among many other countries, unrealistically appears to spend far more than Canada using this misleading measuring method.

Canada is among the wealthiest and most powerful states of the world, and our military spending is consistent with similar states. Canada's military spending appears low only in comparison with U.S. spending.

Most of Canada's military spending is on public record, but much of the Special Operations Forces budget is not.

Government reports indicate that, in late 2001, the Chrétien government doubled JTF2's budget. However, the exact amount of funding per year for JTF2 and, since 2006, for CANSOFCOM and the four units it commands, is kept secret.

The latest available audit of CANSOFCOM financial management practices, published in March 2012, concludes that most CANSOFCOM assets are "recorded in a classified inventory system that is not visible or accessible from the Department's corporate inventory system." The 2012 audit indicates that baseline annual funding "historically approached" \$200 million per year, but this does not include funding "from other parts" of the Department of National Defence and Canadian Forces "for some activities such as deployed operations."

So the monetary cost of covert war remains a state secret in Canada.

Whatever the monetary cost, we can predict, based on recent U.S. history, that the "blowback" effects of covert warfare and training of foreign forces may have devastating consequences. Indeed, the social and political costs of Canadian Special Operations Forces engaging in missions which, (borrowing a phrase from the 2006 Senate Committee report) "Canadian citizens would find reprehensible" outweigh the unknown monetary cost.

Canada's growing "appetite" for foreign military missions

Despite claims to the contrary, Canada's "appetite" for foreign military missions is growing. Among the many reasons for Canada's interest in overseas military expeditions is because Canadian businesses are rapidly expanding abroad, especially in oil and mining operations.

Canadian financed and operated foreign resource extraction ventures, which are inherently environmentally destructive and socially disruptive, can provoke indigenous resistance movements to employ tactics ranging from non-violent protests to warfare.

Any form of indigenous resistance can be costly to Canadian investors. Thus, from an

investor's perspective, it is in Canada's interest to suppress resistance.

Special Operations Forces are an integral component of a broad spectrum of state and private forces that can infiltrate, observe, and suppress local resistance groups; deter protests; repel armed attacks; and generally do whatever the Prime Minister might deem necessary to defend Canadian business interests anywhere in the world.

The most cost-effective means to achieve the desired outcome of pacifying local populations is to pre-emptively train indigenous Special Operations Forces to do the dirty work.

The invasion of Afghanistan

Examining what little is known about the role of JTF2 in the first days of the Global War on/of Terror can help us understand how a Prime Minister may yet again deploy covert forces.

Politicians immediately compared 9/11 to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. However, World War I offers a more accurate analogy. In 1914, Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia on the pretext that the Serbian government supported the terrorists who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. The U.S. claim that the September 2001 terrorist attacks justified invading Afghanistan to begin the Global War on/of Terror are as credible as Austria-Hungary's claim that the June 1914 terrorist attacks justified invading Serbia to begin World War I.

Nevertheless, Canada joined the small but powerful coalition that invaded Afghanistan, and our JTF2 was among the Special Operations Forces from a handful of countries that invaded Afghanistan, on October 7, 2001.

Contrary to the pronouncements of the Chrétien government and every successive Canadian government, the United Nations did not sanction the invasion of Afghanistan. Proponents claim UN Security Council Resolutions 1368 and 1373 sanctioned the invasion, but these documents did not even contain the word "Afghanistan." The resolutions condemned the crimes committed on 9/11 and urged all states to assist in bringing any criminals responsible to justice. The resolutions also outlined means to apprehend the criminals and prevent further

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Tuesday, 08 October 2013 07:38 -

terrorist actions. The resolutions did not, however, sanction an invasion of Afghanistan.

Some prominent proponents of the war claim Canada was nevertheless obligated by its commitment to NATO to invade Afghanistan. But this argument is also a fabrication. A NATO resolution cannot exceed the authority of the UN – and, besides, NATO did not invade Afghanistan in 2001.

On September 12, 2001, NATO did invoke Article 5 of its charter, which bound its members to defend the U.S. from further attacks. According to NATO documents, NATO sent aircraft to North America and re-assigned naval assets to the eastern Mediterranean. NATO leaders carefully engaged only in these defensive military actions within the parameters of international law. Although they effectively endorsed the invasion of Afghanistan, they understood they could not legally send an invasion force into that country. Even if they wished to participate more aggressively, most European leaders realized their constituents would not support an illegal invasion.

Most Canadians did not know their country invaded Afghanistan. Members of the Canadian Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs could not even ask about JTF2's role in Afghanistan until November 20, 2001.

The committee questioned Major-General Cameron Ross, the Director-General of International Security Policy at National Defence headquarters, about the role of JTF2. He responded evasively: "You can envision a community, a city, in Afghanistan, one of many, where there's an airfield, where there are some roads coming into that community, where the NGOs, particularly the World Food Program, have been delivering food with their trucks during the hostilities. There are a number of varying interests, factions, and warlords who are around this community. It is in this type of community and situation that we envision Canadian troops going in with our coalition partners. It may be the securing of this airfield. It may be the securing of a food warehouse, of a hospital — instruments of normalcy, for lack of a better term."

After elaborating at length about how Canadian Forces might provide humanitarian aid to needy Afghans, Major-General Ross finally answered: "With respect to JTF2, I hope you will understand I cannot go into any detail about their involvement, other than to say that a component of this asset of the Canadian Forces has been made available to the coalition."

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Before the invasion, numerous human rights organizations warned that allying with the mujahideen warlords of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (aka the Northern Alliance) would inevitably result in aiding and abetting their war crimes. As reprehensible as the Taliban, these mujahideen warlords were alleged to have committed almost every war crime and crime against humanity imaginable throughout the ongoing civil war.

Nonetheless, allied Special Operations Forces used the armies of the mujahideen warlords as their frontline forces, in the process facilitating further war crimes. This instilled distrust among many Afghans, who saw the foreign invaders as complicit in the crimes of the mujahideen.

Canadian political and military strategists learned only one lesson from their horrific violation of the international laws of war and international humanitarian law: that they could get away with it. Covert warfare was proven to be an effective way of subverting international law.

Canada and the New Silk Road

Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan supposedly ended in 2011. But, considering the secrecy of Canada's Special Operations Forces, we cannot know whether JTF2, CSOR, and the 427 SOAS continue to fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan, either under Canadian command or seconded to U.S. command.

What we do know is that Afghanistan remains Canada's largest foreign policy and military commitment.

The mainstream media focus on 2014 as the imminent end of the war, while ignoring official U.S. and NATO statements that allied combat forces and trainers will remain in Afghanistan until at least 2024.

We can be sure Canadian Forces will continue to play a role in the occupation of Afghanistan. Even if overt military roles become too unpopular to sustain, the Prime Minister

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Tuesday, 08 October 2013 07:38 -

can deploy our country's covert forces.

When Canadians began to realize the implausibility of fighting a war to liberate Afghan women and girls, popular support for the occupation of Afghanistan declined rapidly. But many Canadian investors recognize the potential for profits in continuing to pry Afghanistan "open for business," as well as the need to protect their investments with a large military force.

In the March edition of the Monitor, I wrote about the New Silk Road initiative – a plan to open Afghanistan and its neighbours to free trade and connect the regions of Eurasia via a sprawling system of transportation, communications, and energy transmission networks. One of many economic catalysts for its construction is Afghanistan's unexploited resource wealth.

American strategic planners conceptualized this "New Silk Road" in the 1990s, but protectionist Taliban leaders stalled its implementation. The leaders of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (aka the Northern Alliance) were more amenable to doing business with the U.S. and its allies.

The banks and governments of Canada and Japan, as the largest investors in the Asian Development Bank, are also the largest investors in Afghanistan's New Silk Road.

Some Afghans will profit, but many will be displaced by the industrial development of Afghanistan's resources and the transportation, communications, and energy transmission infrastructure now being constructed. Without adequate compensation for being subjected to environmental degradation and social disruption, Afghans are bound to continue to resist these developments.

So it is obviously in the interest of some Canadian investors to maintain strict military control of Afghanistan so as to prevent or crush such resistance.

It is time to scrutinize much more closely the roles of Canada's Special Operations Forces in the "dirty wars" in Afghanistan and beyond. The Senate Committee investigating Canada's first unit of Special Operations Forces declared in 2006 that "it is not proper in a democracy for

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citizens to wash their hands of monitoring JTF2's activities carefully to ensure that the unit is doing what the government intends it to do, while operating in a manner consistent with the law."

It is clear, however, that, since this urgent Senate warning seven years ago, and despite the subsequent expansion of Canada's Special Operations Forces, most Canadians – and even the Senate Committee members themselves – are still "washing their hands." Canada's growing appetite and capacity for covert warfare remains shrouded in secrecy and almost completely unscrutinized.

There may be plausible reasons for maintaining elite military defence forces. But no argument can justify keeping the activities – even the composition -- of Canada's Special Operations Forces so tightly concealed from Canadian citizens. All we know is that these covert military battalions are available for the Prime Minister to deploy arbitrarily in dirty wars -- and to suppress any efforts by indigenous people in other countries to stop the pillaging of their resources by Canadian oil, gas, and mining companies.

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