I have had the honor of writing this column for members of NCHE for the last few years. This year, I asked Josh, a freshman student and office assistant who learned little about Canada while in high school, what he wished he knew more about now. Without hesitation, he wanted to know more about Canada’s role in the Middle East, so I promptly recommended he begin research for this article on Canada’s role in Afghanistan. The following information and resource references were provided by Josh; we both hope this example encourages you to similarly ask your own students to explore connections to Canada. They might consider other 20th Century military actions when Canada and the US were allies (e.g. WWI, WWII, Korean War) or perhaps when they were not (e.g. Viet Nam, the status of Cuba, and the Iraqi War).

Canada has been an important military ally to the US since WWI and this partnership continued throughout the Cold War through joint involvement in both NORAD and NATO. A high volume of trade and migration between the US and Canada has generated even closer ties between our two countries since then. The 5,525-mile border that we share compels us to partner in the perimeter security of North America; a number of initiatives are currently in place in that regard… but what about Canada’s role in the Middle East?

Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan is little reported by mainstream media in the US. The truth is, however, that both the US and Canada have been involved in Afghanistan for quite some time and for various reasons. Prior to 2001, Canadian relations with Afghanistan were largely based on providing humanitarian aid and supporting resistance against invading Soviet troops. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US, however, our two countries began a joint effort to bring down the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In October 2001, Canada contributed land, sea, and air forces to support the US and United Kingdom-led “Operation Enduring Freedom”, which attacked Al-Qaeda (the terrorist network in Afghanistan) and brought down the Taliban regime (which supported Al-Qaeda). In less than three months, the Taliban were ousted from power and an interim government established, becoming official on December 22nd, 2001. This process was made possible by the creation of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), authorized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Both Canada and the US then re-established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and began the long process of rebuilding the country.

From 2002 to 2003, both the US and Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan turned back to providing humanitarian aid and helping with development.
Then, in the summer of 2003, Canadian soldiers took their turn as part of the ISAF team (also known as UN Coalition Forces), to provide military security for those working in Kabul. These Canadian soldiers risked their lives to maintain security around the capital so that American and other NATO forces could accomplish their own tasks of rebuilding Afghanistan’s government.\(^1\,^3\)

Since 2002, a total of 158 Canadian Forces personnel have been killed in the war and, not surprisingly, it was little reported in the US that the first four Canadian casualties were the result of friendly fire from a US warplane. [To learn more about the “Tarnak Farm” incident, see http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/friendlyfire]. The incident initiated controversy within Canada about its involvement in the Middle East and its status as a peacekeeping nation—especially when Canada later experienced its own military blunders with civilian casualties.

Two years later, Canadian soldiers were deployed again, this time in the dangerous Kandahar region (a province in Southern Afghanistan). This area is notorious for susceptibility to attacks from insurgents. Canada, in charge of the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT), worked side-by-side with the US to clear the area of terrorism and assist with the development and distribution of aid until 2010, when the US took over all military operations. Canadian forces still remained in the region after 2010, in order to complete three signature projects started in 2008: 1) to rehabilitate the Dahla Dam and its irrigation system in the province of Kandahar; 2) build and repair 50 schools and train 3000 teachers in the province; 3) assist a national effort to eradicate polio.\(^1\,^3\,^4\)

The six priorities for Canada in Afghanistan are outlined below and more details can be found via hyperlinks http://tinyurl.com/b2sdqpa when you scroll down to 2008 on the timeline and are also detailed in “Reports to Parliament” at http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/documents/qr-rt.aspx?lang=eng&view=d.

1. Maintain a more secure environment and establish law and order by building the capacity of the Afghan National Army and Police, and support complementary efforts in the areas of justice and corrections.
2. Provide jobs, education and essential services, like water.
3. Provide humanitarian assistance to people in need, including refugees.
4. Enhance the management and security of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.
5. Build Afghan institutions that are central to our Kandahar priorities and support democratic processes such as elections.
6. Contribute to Afghan-led political reconciliation efforts aimed at weakening insurgency and fostering sustainable peace.

In July, 2011, Canada began the transition to non-combat support in Afghanistan, finally pulling out the last of its troops over a year ago, on December 15, 2011. Canada has announced plans to pull out of Afghanistan completely by 2014, and has revealed its non-combat plans for the 2011-2014 period. Some of the plans below are similar to the six priorities listed above, but it is important to note that these new plans are based out of Kabul, since the US is now responsible

1. Investing in the future of Afghan children and youth through development programming in education and health, and improving the lives of Afghans, especially women and children.
2. Advancing security, the rule of law and human rights, including the provision of up to 950 military trainers, their support personnel and approximately 45 Canadian civilian police to support and train Afghan National Security Forces.
4. Helping to deliver humanitarian assistance.

Without the support of Canadians in Afghanistan, the US would not have been able to carry out “Operation Enduring Freedom.” The lives of American diplomats working with the Kabul Interim Government were protected by the Canadian soldiers who were a part of the ISAF, and Americans in the dangerous Kandahar region were able to rely on their Canadian allies for protection. Finally, Canada accomplished many goals in Afghanistan that complemented American efforts. The reliance has grown to such an extent that the US has repeatedly called upon Canada to remain in Afghanistan.

The following news reports display both American interest in Canadian support but also the controversy in Canada about maintaining a military profile in Afghanistan now that the US killed bin Laden. Even in the US, support for staying in Afghanistan has waned; however, that debate is perhaps best left for another article, a classroom activity, or our political leaders to consider more fully.


References:


