



## **Afghanistan – Looking Beyond February 2009**

By Paul D. Manson

Stephen Harper's Conservative government is feeling boxed in these days by the unprecedented deadline imposed by parliament on Canada's Afghanistan mission. With casualties dominating the news and public support wavering, the government must balance its minority position against the need to do the right thing in Afghanistan beyond the February '09 deadline.

Recent statements by the Prime Minister indicate that a political compromise is being sought. Having discounted the possibility of extending the current mandate, and suggesting that he would seek parliamentary support for a revised mission, the PM has opened the door for what could be a major change in direction.

With an extension of the current mandate now unlikely, the government has several available options, ranging from a complete withdrawal at one extreme to a modestly reduced presence on both the military and diplomatic fronts at the other.

A total pullout, however, can be set aside at the outset. The consequences of handing the Taliban a huge victory both in military and political terms, of abandoning the Afghan people, of making our country look like the bad boy of the International Security Assistance Force (however unjustly), would be so severe that a decision along these lines seems quite unlikely. The only possible justification for a complete pullout in 2009 would be an assurance that one or more ISAF nations would fill in the vacuum left in Kandahar by Canada's departure.

Kandahar, after all, is the key strategic area in the struggle for Afghanistan, and its loss to the Taliban would have the most

serious consequences. Unfortunately, the prospect of a NATO or ISAF backfill is slight.

So what are the practical possibilities?

It has been suggested that Canadian troops might be given a welcome respite from their heavy security duties by moving them to the relatively peaceful north, but that again begs the question about who would take over Canada's role in Kandahar.

Both Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor and Chief of the Defence Staff Rick Hillier, correctly recognizing that increased security must be established in the Kandahar region if development initiatives are to make substantial headway, have recently indicated that the defence staff is looking at a plan that would involve a continued but reduced military presence, while contributing to the build-up of security in the region.

Most observers agree that the long term solution to the problem of the Taliban lies in the development of the fledgling Afghan National Army (ANA) into an effective security force. General Hillier suggests that a reduced Canadian military contingent could exercise great leverage by training and mentoring the ANA in Kandahar Province. This builds on Canadian mentoring successes to date. Our soldiers are good at helping their ANA allies, and their efforts have already shown impressive results. The Afghan soldiers are quick to learn.

Increasingly, the Afghan army would move to the "front", so to speak, in the war against the insurgents, and the Canadians would ease back accordingly. By the end of the summer there will be three battalions of ANA troops in Kandahar Province and two more by year-end, bringing them up to a strength of 5000, out of a total ANA complement of 30,000 across Afghanistan.

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The net impact on the Canadian mission would be a reduced military presence, less direct contact with the Taliban, fewer casualties, reduced cost, yet good value for the investment. Perhaps, also, if the plan is effective, it could be a model for the rest of the ISAF.

This plan is not a panacea. There would remain an urgent need for more NATO troops in Kandahar, and the Canadian government must not give up its urgent call for increased operational participation by allied nations. Beyond “boots on the ground”, there is a particular requirement for medium lift helicopter support, currently available in several NATO nations, yet not deployed to Afghanistan in sufficient numbers.

There are other ways that Canadians might contribute, post-2009, to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. Development aid can be increased and more efficiently applied at the local level. The Strategic Advisory Team in Kabul, until recently quite unheralded, has been remarkably successful in helping the Karzai administration build the machinery of government at the federal level. The SAT concept could be exploited to good effect in Kandahar Province, making use of Canadian civil servants as much as possible. (Until now, the SAT has been made up of military officers.) Training of the Afghan National Police by Canadians could also be greatly expanded.

The Whole of Government approach to Afghanistan, given a real boost by the Prime Minister’s appointment of David Mulroney as the interdepartmental coordinator for Afghanistan, is the way to go as the government searches for a new mission structure beyond the current mandate. Communicating the Afghanistan story effectively to the Canadian public must be a high priority in the months and years ahead.

There is an urgent need for an early decision on the new mandate. Military planning alone needs to get underway

months in advance. The political process will be complicated, given the call for a parliamentary consensus. All of this suggests that a parliamentary debate should take place when the House reconvenes this autumn. Once a decision is made, Canada must then quickly inform NATO of its intentions post-2009, so that corresponding adjustments can be made to the Alliance’s grand strategy for Afghanistan.

The importance of the coming decision should not be lost on Canadians. Maintaining some form of effective presence in the struggle to prevent the return of a brutal Taliban regime is very much in the Canadian national interest. Now is not the time to write off Canada’s large and painful human and material investment, undoing all of the substantial progress that has been made to date..

Saving Afghanistan is a long term undertaking, and Canada needs to remain a part of it.

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