



Could Canada Pull Out From Afghanistan? A “What If” Scenario

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Recent polls indicate that many Canadians are uneasy about their nation's 2300-strong military presence in Afghanistan. The anxiety seems to grow with every new casualty, whether caused by enemy action or traffic accidents in that war-torn land.

The concern is understandable. Afghanistan is a far-off land whose history is scarcely known here. We might associate that nation vaguely with ancient stories of the exotic Silk Road, or with the “Great Game” in which larger neighbours and colonial powers fought over this mountainous, landlocked country because of its strategic location.

More recently there was a flurry of interest when, in late 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, only to be expelled by the victorious mujahideen warriors 10 years later.

Then there were the dreadful excesses of the Taliban regime, which unwisely (as it turned out) provided an operating base for Al Qaeda, leading to the regime's forcible expulsion by the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 outrage.

Canadians also know, by and

large, that a new government under Hamid Karzai was democratically elected in 2004, and that it remains in office with the strong support of the United States, NATO and other allied nations.

Then there has been the recent reappearance of the Taliban, this time as an opposing terrorist force, supported by the warlords who control most of the regions of the country outside of the capital, Kabul, and funded largely by Afghanistan's huge opium poppy industry, which provides 90% of Europe's heroin.

And so Canada, in response to an urgent appeal from the Karzai Government, has joined the 30-nation NATO mission in an ambitious effort to rebuild the country through sixteen Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), an undertaking which presupposes the establishment of a good measure of security in each area.

Canada has taken the lead in the Kandahar region, which presents a considerable challenge, in that the anti-government Taliban forces are particularly strong and active there.

In a nutshell, then, this is the setting for the great national debate on Afghanistan.

In reality, the situation is far more complex, Afghanistan being

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what it is – a remarkable and confusing mix of cultures, languages, geographies, and variations of the Islam religion.

It is no wonder that the average Canadian is uncertain about our role there. Should we resolve the dilemma, as some suggest, by simply pulling our troops out?

In response to those who advocate withdrawal, the Government and its supporters on this issue are inclined to point out the positive aspects of our nation's involvement in Afghanistan, such as the importance of helping that tortured nation find peace, freedom and prosperity after decades of warfare, as well as bringing fundamental human rights to its citizens (especially its women), providing schools for Afghan youth, security across the countryside, and water and electricity for the local population.

But there is another way to make the case. Why not consider what might happen if Canada were to withdraw its support from Afghanistan?

Although no one can be certain of the consequences, some outcomes seem inevitable, and others quite probable. Here is an estimate of the principal results of a Canadian decision to pull out:

- There would be a serious impact on our relations with the United States. Our American friends in particular would see this as yet

another example of Canada seeking the “free ride” and shirking its obligation to join in the struggle against global terrorism. An already shaky cross-border relationship would be set back severely, with negative implications for trade, travel restrictions and other dimensions of the Canada/US partnership.

- There would be damage to Canada's status in NATO. Our European allies would be frankly appalled at the Canadian action, at a time when many of them are facing similar disquiet at home about their commitment to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. A withdrawal by Canada would be seen as a betrayal. Nations like the Netherlands, which only joined the international effort following a healthy and sometimes acrimonious domestic debate, but will not deploy its contingent till September, would be placed in a difficult position. Canada would look like the bad boy of NATO.
- The Taliban would see Canada's backing out as a great victory. To have “defeated” our soldiers, whom they must know are top quality fighters, would be a triumph of the first order over the “infidel occupiers”. Indeed,



the spate of attacks on the Canadian contingent which took place in the early days of the Kandahar operation seems to have been designed to intimidate the Canadian population. A successful outcome (from the Taliban perspective) would be a clear signal that terrorist attacks against PRT forces are working. This would likely be a stimulus for further such attacks.

- A Canadian withdrawal would be a blow to the fragile Karzai Government in Kabul, which in reality controls only the immediate area of the national capital. The loss of a key PRT would be seen as a sign of political weakness.
- The PRT process itself would be in considerable jeopardy. The Canadians are in Kandahar because they are very good at what they are doing, and Kandahar is the linchpin of the entire PRT program. Failure there could lead to withdrawal by other nations' forces, and a general breakdown of the reconstruction program.
- The real victims in this scenario would be the people of Afghanistan, the great majority of whom desperately want peace, security, freedom and prosperity after so many years

of hardship. A decision by Canada to renege on its commitment to them would be a sad blow.

- Finally, in showing such weakness in the face of fanatic terrorism, Canada will have made itself a lucrative target for future attacks. Will we talk some day about New York, London, Madrid, Bali and Vancouver?

All things considered, then, a decision by the new Conservative government to pull out now would be ill-advised, and it would be an unfortunate turning point in the history of our nation's contribution to peace and security beyond our own borders.

The government will surely stay the course, as it must. There will be continuing criticism by those with narrower views. There will be more casualties. We will be in Afghanistan for the long haul.

But it will be worth it, and Canadians will be able to hold their heads high for having contributed so well to the betterment of Afghanistan – and the world.

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