



## **The Looming Afghanistan Question**

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With the current deadline of February 2009 rapidly approaching, the Conservative Government must decide what to do about Canada's commitment to Afghanistan beyond that date.

It will be a tough political decision, given Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent indication that he will seek a parliamentary consensus on the question. Without the support of at least one opposition party, a proposal to extend the combat mission beyond 2009 would likely fail, and so might the government. The Throne Speech in October will certainly bring focus to the question.

Public support for the military mission remains more or less steady across Canada, fluctuating around the 50 percent mark but with some variation from region to region -- notably in Québec, where it is currently about 35 percent. Much of the opposition is a reaction to Canadian casualties, intensely reported in the media as never before when Canada was at war.

The best political move might be simply to pull out at the end of the present mandate. This would appeal to voters in Québec in particular, thereby giving the Conservatives a shot at majority government the next time around. It is a tempting option, but

unfortunately it isn't that easy. Any substantial reduction to Canada's commitment to Afghanistan would have serious repercussions on several fronts.

Militarily, a withdrawal of our 2500-strong battalion group plus supporting troops would leave a huge security void in Kandahar Province, which the Taliban would quickly exploit, given the reality that no other NATO nation is likely to take over Canada's responsibilities in that critical region, and that the fledgling Afghan National Army is not yet ready to face the Taliban alone.

Canada's withdrawal, therefore, would be a major victory for the Taliban, both militarily and politically.

Furthermore, the impact on development would be equally severe. Canadians, by and large, are unfamiliar with the impressive progress that is being made across a wide front in Afghanistan, helping the people of that nation get back on their feet after decades of war and terrorist activity. Remarkable advances have been made in health care, education, women's rights, business, infrastructure, media freedom and governance.

All of this is anathema to the Taliban, who don't want Afghans to see the benefits that the "foreign infidels" are bringing to their country. The security vacuum following a Canadian departure would be an invitation to the terrorists to reverse much of the progress achieved to date, and forcibly halt further development in the region. It is a truism that development can only make

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real headway in the secure environment that friendly military forces provide.

A decision to pull out would also damage Canada's reputation amongst its 36 allies in the International Security Assistance Force, especially those nations which, like Canada, have been doing the "heavy lifting" in fighting the Taliban.

On the positive side, of course, closing out our military presence would result in budgetary savings, restore imbalances in the Canadian Forces, and eliminate battle casualties. But the seventy Canadians who gave their lives in Afghanistan over the past five years would have been sacrificed in vain.

On balance, a complete withdrawal has some serious implications for Canadians and for their government. In searching for a solution that is both politically viable yet strategically sound, the Conservatives will surely be looking at less drastic options for 2009.

One idea currently being examined is arranging a gradual transition from "front-line" combat operations to what would be a mentoring role in support of the Afghan National Army in Kandahar Province. "Gradual" is the key word here, to ensure that there is no loss in total security during the process of building the ANA's proficiency to the point where it can increasingly undertake the lead in securing the region. This concept makes good strategic sense, in that the only viable long term solution is for the Afghans to look after their own security once the international force has done its work and gone home.

In looking to Afghanistan's future, it becomes obvious that time is of the essence. Given the many problems yet to be overcome by the government and people of that country, there can be no

quick solutions, even with the help of their international partners. Neutralizing the Taliban will take years. Solving the opium problem will require a decade or more. Establishing an effective system of governance is likely a generational challenge.

If Afghanistan is allowed to fail in all of this, if the Taliban return to power, it would be a huge victory for the dark forces of radical islamism, with profound implications for safety and security in the West, including Canada.

In making the critical decision facing it, the Harper government, indeed Canadians collectively, need to weigh the short term benefits of withdrawal from Afghanistan - political, budgetary and emotional - against the severe consequences of a total pull-out or rapid reduction in February, 2009.

It is especially important that political expediency and short term gain not be allowed to result in longer term problems that we would later regret.

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