



Four Reasons Why Canada is in Afghanistan

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The 10th April parliamentary debate on Canada's role in Afghanistan was the latest chapter of the Harper government's public relations blitz to sell the Afghanistan mission to a Canadian public that has demonstrated increasing skepticism and unease about the military deployment.

Dubbed a "take note" debate due to the fact that it was not followed by a vote, it came only days after a Decima Research poll found that 46% of respondents considered the deployment a bad idea as compared to 45% who approved of the mission. Other recent opinion polls have shown that only a slim majority of Canadians support the mission.

As casualties begin to mount – 11 soldiers and one diplomat have been killed in Afghanistan since 2002 – more and more Canadians will ask the question: Why are we there? After all, Afghanistan is a distant country alien to most Canadians with few obvious strategic, economic, or political ties.

The government must maintain the intensity of efforts to convey to the Canadian public the purpose and

importance of our engagement in Afghanistan, not just in Kandahar, but in the country as a whole. In doing so, it should emphasize four reasons:

First, preventing Afghanistan from once again degenerating into a failed state, a haven for international terrorists and criminal networks, is in Canada's security interest.

The September 11th terrorist attacks demonstrated that weak states such as Afghanistan can pose as great a threat to international security as strong ones. A whole generation of terrorists and insurgents were trained in Afghanistan, including the majority of the September 11th hijackers as well as key perpetrators of the Bali, Casablanca and Madrid bombings.

When the U.S.-led Coalition invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 it destroyed the bulk of the terrorist infrastructure in the country. However, if the post-Taliban political order were to falter, that infrastructure would be restored quickly and Afghanistan would once again become an incubator of global terrorism.

Second, we have an obligation to our NATO allies to remain engaged in the country.

Afghanistan has become the

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litmus test for the viability of NATO, an organization working to carve out a niche in the post-Cold War world. To demonstrate its continued relevance, NATO has sought to engage in operations outside its traditional European sphere of influence, a challenge embodied by a mantra of the NATO leadership, “out of area or out of business”.

NATO’s assumption of control over the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003 could be considered a defining moment of NATO’s transformation. Canada’s firm commitment to NATO and the principles of collective security and multilateralism obligates us to support NATO’s expansion to the south of the country, which will be completed by the summer.

With NATO having faced immense difficulties securing troop contributions from its member states, a premature withdrawal of Canadian forces would not only imperil the ISAF mission but deliver a severe blow to NATO.

Third, we have a moral obligation to remain engaged.

Afghanistan is one of the most impoverished country’s in the world, ranking 173rd out of 178 countries in the United Nations’ 2005 Human Development Index. As a country committed to poverty reduction and the realization of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, we cannot overlook the plight of the Afghan people, as the West did when

it abandoned the country at the end of the Cold War.

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, the West turned its back on Afghanistan as the country descended into a civil war that led to the deaths of thousands, the displacement of millions, and the wholesale destruction of the country’s economy and infrastructure.

Finally, we must stay the course in Afghanistan because we are succeeding.

In spite of the ominous headlines that occupy the front pages of Canada’s newspapers, focusing on the increasingly perilous security situation in the south and east of the country, Afghanistan has made remarkable progress over the past five years.

Observers in 2001 would have scarcely believed that within five years of the signing of the Bonn Agreement, which created the first interim government, that the country would have held presidential and parliamentary elections, promulgated a constitution through a broadly consultative process, and demobilized over 61,000 former combatants. The Afghan economy has grown by an average of 17% per annum since 2002 and is expected to grow at a respectable 8-9% over the coming five years.

Perhaps most importantly, the majority of Afghans, unlike their Iraqi counterparts, continue to support the internationally-sponsored reconstruction process.



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Canada has played a key role in this difficult transition to stability and democracy. Through our robust military commitment, exemplified by the Kandahar deployment; well targeted development assistance, totaling more than \$900 million since 2001; and effective diplomacy provided by the Canadian embassy team in Kabul, Canada has been able to maximize its influence. Canada has a seat at most important decision-making tables in the country and is widely respected by both its Afghan and international partners.

Afghanistan has become a showcase for Canada's new cross-governmental approach to complex development and post-conflict situations, known as '3D' (defence, development and diplomacy) and is coming to be viewed as a global leader and innovator in the area.

This is not meant to minimize or overlook the monumental challenges that remain, primarily in the area of security, where a stubborn Taliban-led insurgency and the exponential rise in opium production pose a salient threat to the state-building project. We must remain cognizant of the reality that rebuilding a country after more than two decades of civil war is a long-term endeavor that will necessitate a decade of concerted international support to fulfill.

As the past month has shown, the military deployment to Kandahar carries great risks that will test the

country's resolve. Canada's commitment to Afghanistan has already come at a heavy price in terms of human life and more casualties are likely in the months ahead. However, we must not let such adversity shake our commitment to this worthy mission.

The Afghan people continue to face a window of opportunity to put decades of war behind them and rebuild their shattered country. It is in Canada's interest to help them seize it for as the outgoing Afghan Foreign Minister, Dr. Abdullah Abdallah, candidly stated on a 2003 visit to Washington, DC: "I'm not optimistic to say if we lose this opportunity that there will be another one."

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