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Why Canada Should Keep Its Troops in Afghanistan ^[1]

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Canadians are growing increasingly jittery about their country's military participation in Afghanistan. A majority of Canadians now wonder if the political cost of maintaining troops in Afghanistan is too high. They should realize that the cost of not being there would be even higher.

According to a recent public opinion poll, 55 percent of respondents favor a pullout of Canadian troops from Afghanistan, if the casualty rate continues to climb. Meanwhile, more Canadians oppose their government's handling of the war (48 percent) than approve of it (44 percent). And perhaps most disturbingly, 67 percent believe the presence of Canadian troops in Afghanistan renders the country more prone to a terrorist attack. The poll was conducted from April 26-May 1 by SES Research for Sun Media.

While such concerns are understandable, Canadians need to keep in mind that a Canadian troop withdrawal from the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan would have a disastrous impact on reconstruction efforts. It would also stand to make Canada less secure, given the global threats posed by narco-terrorism.

At present there are about 2,500 Canadian troops in Afghanistan, many of them concentrated in and around Kandahar, long considered a Taliban stronghold. The Canadian contingent has made key contributions to the ongoing effort to contain the Taliban cross-border insurgency. In September 2006, for example, Canadian forces led Operation Medusa, a two-week-long offensive that succeeded in driving Taliban militants out of Panjwayi, a town roughly 30 kilometers west of Kandahar City.

When Canadians and citizens of other NATO countries look at the record of failure of military interventions in Afghanistan over the past century-and-a-half, they may be tempted to ask: "what kind of chance of success does NATO have?" People should realize, however, that comparing the present-day stabilization mission to past military adventures is not appropriate.

Past foreign involvements in Afghanistan -- including those of the British and Russian Empires in the 19th century, and, more recently, the Soviet Union in the late 20th century -- were motivated by imperial and ideological competition. Those powers neither signed the Afghanistan Compact, nor were they striving to build a stable, democratic and self-reliant society.

Today, more than 70 nations are working together to stabilize Afghanistan and consolidate its new democracy. This truly international endeavor enjoys the overwhelming support of Afghans, who constitute an important strategic asset in the fight to contain terrorism. Thus, it

is clear that Canada is in Afghanistan for different reasons altogether.

One of the most significant reasons for Canada's involvement is the country's own national security. One cannot deny the real security imperative Canadians will face if Afghanistan's stabilization efforts fail, and the country becomes the domain of narco-terrorists. Canadians may be wary of terrorist retaliation, but a surge in the illegal drug supply represents perhaps an even greater danger.

It is imprudent to think that Canada is exempt from increasing transnational security threats and that Canadian national security is not at stake with its mission in Afghanistan.

In light of this reality, the Canadian parliament extended the mission of their forces in Afghanistan until 2009, which the Afghan people gratefully welcomed as a lasting Canadian commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

The government of Canada has increasingly focused on addressing the human security needs of Afghanistan's 25 million people. Last February, Canada committed \$200 million in reconstruction funding to help the Afghan people stand on their own feet. The funding, in addition to Canada's annual allocation of \$100 million for development programs in Afghanistan, will support five priority areas: governance and development; counter-narcotics; police reform; mine clearance; and road construction. This balanced approach to peace-building in Afghanistan should be emulated and further strengthened by other nation-building participants to leave no gaps for the Taliban to fill.

Canada and its NATO allies have already registered substantial achievements in promoting Afghanistan's reconstruction over the past six years. To consolidate gains already made, Canada and other NATO members need to support the upcoming Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Peace Jirga, which Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, have initiated, seeking ways to end the cross-border insurgency and to neutralize the Taliban's influence in Pakistan.

In addition, NATO forces, including the Canadian contingent, must implement a balanced "clear-hold-build" strategy in the restive provinces that border Pakistan. In most areas where the Karzai's Afghan government is weak, the Taliban is strong. This situation must be reversed. Once each area is swept of Taliban militants, NATO must help foster a strong Afghan government presence in these regions, enabling officials to both deliver essential services and to promote security. NATO troops can also support Afghan government efforts to break the power of narco-terrorists. This multi-pronged approach to peace-building would go a long way toward achieving Afghanistan's stabilization goals. And a stable Afghanistan means a heightened sense of security for Canada and other NATO members.
