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PAUL WALDIE Liberal Leader Stephane Dion says Canada should end its combat role in Afghanistan in 2009 even if no other NATO country is prepared to step in.

"We need to know if NATO works," he told The Globe and Mail's editorial board yesterday. "Because otherwise other countries will be more and more reluctant to take any responsibility, because they will be afraid to be there forever." Mr. Dion said the Afghan mission is a challenge for NATO because it marks the first time the alliance has ventured beyond its geographic base. He said a strong commitment by Canada to cease combat operations after February, 2009, will be a test of whether NATO is truly a multilateral organization.

If elected prime minister, he would pull Canadian troops out of Kandahar after February, 2009, even if that left the region without a NATO combat force, he said.

Mr. Dion said he would tell the alliance: "We're gone. We'll do something else. We're ready to work with you to see what will be our role, but the combat mission in Kandahar must be, as soon after 2009, [done] by another country or a set of other countries." Defence Minister Peter MacKay said this week that Canada will notify NATO in April whether it will extend its combat mission in Kandahar. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has also said that Parliament must approve any extension beyond 2009.

Canada has 2,500 troops stationed in southern Afghanistan as part of a NATO coalition fighting the Taliban. The area is considered one of the most dangerous parts of the country.

Mr. Dion also said that he is prepared to vote against the Harper government's Throne Speech on Oct. 16 if it fails to include clarification of the Afghanistan mission as well as a reintroduction of clean-air legislation and a plan to combat poverty.

"I cannot stand up for a Throne Speech that I think is against the interests of Canada and against the honour of Canada," he said.

Mr. Dion also defended his recent call for Canada to demand a civilian trial for terrorism suspect Omar Khadr, a Canadian who is being held in the U.S. detention centre in Guantanamo Bay.

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"It's a matter of rights," Mr. Dion said. He said Canada is alone among most Western nations in not asking that its detainees be repatriated.

"What we are asking for is not to bring him [to] a Canadian court.

but to bring him [to] a legitimate U.S. court." This week a U.S. military appeal court overturned a lower court decision and ruled that a military court is the proper venue to hear Mr. Khadr's case.

When asked how he would grade his performance since winning the Liberal leadership race last year, Mr. Dion, a former university professor, gave himself an A.

He added that it was really for others to rate him, but the fact that Mr. Harper's Conservatives have not pulled away in the polls is a sign that his leadership is working.

"I would argue it's because Canadians have more confidence in our convictions and sincerity," he said, "especially they are more comfortable in my sincerity than Mr. Harper's."

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