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Embassy, February 13th, 2008  
NEWS STORY

## Kosovo Dominates Afghanistan

For NATO members, stability in Europe is a higher priority than Afghanistan, a notion one Canadian general dismisses as an excuse to avoiding combat.

By Lee Berthiaume

European members of NATO are anxiously watching Kosovo's drive for independence, which could happen within the next few days and is already a major priority for many.

Two retired Canadians generals with experience in the Balkans, however, said possible troubles in Kosovo shouldn't be used by European nations as an excuse not to do their fair share in Afghanistan.

Kosovo's possible unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia has been bubbling for months.

Some Western countries, notably the United States, have voiced their support. However, others, including Serbian ally Russia, have opposed the move at the United Nations. Canada has remained largely silent on the issue, in part because Kosovo could set a precedent that could some day apply to Quebec.

Now it appears the rhetoric has reached a boiling point, as Kosovo's newly appointed prime minister, Hashim Thaci, was quoted last Saturday as saying the past weekend would be the last the province would not be independent.

In an interview last week, German Ambassador to Canada Matthias Höpfner said that while Afghanistan is the most important mission facing NATO as a whole, German headlines are being dominated by the situation in Kosovo.

"It is a very important issue right next door, seen from the German perspective," he said. "This is about security and stability in the centre of Europe and it needs to be taken extremely seriously."

Mr. Höpfner said he is optimistic that even if a declaration of independence is made, calm and stability will reign. But when asked whether Afghanistan is Germany's top foreign issue, as it is in Canada, the ambassador said no.

"I wouldn't say it's the biggest. It's one of the most important ones, yes. But there are a number of other very important issues," he said, again pointing to

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### Afghan Troop Commitment Talks Should be in Private

Germany wants any discussion about future Afghanistan troop commitments during April's NATO meeting in Bucharest to be held behind closed doors, says German Ambassador Matthias Höpfner.

If not, public and parliamentary support for the mission could suffer, he added, making it even more difficult to secure a mandate in the country.

"I don't see that yet, but should such a discussion continue in an intensive manner, there is a certain possibility that it may influence in a detrimental way the parliamentary and public

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Kosovo.

Most European NATO members have troops deployed in the Balkans, or Kosovo specifically. Germany has 2,470 troops in the province, while France has 2,000, Denmark has 314, Italy has 2,255, the Czech Republic 430, and Greece 633.

Greece's contribution to Kosovo is more than five times what it has in Afghanistan, and Ioannis Petsilas, the embassy's press counsellor in Ottawa, said the Balkans is by far Greece's top concern.

"For us, of course, Kosovo is more important than Afghanistan," he said Monday. "It is a top priority for Europe, there's no doubt about that."

**Canada Doesn't Grasp Implications**

Instability and violence in the Balkans have been at the root of many conflicts in Europe over the past century, from the First World War to the NATO-led bombing campaign of 1999.

Mr. Petsilas said the ongoing instability in Kosovo has had an impact on his country's ability to contribute more to Afghanistan. Some NATO members, notably Canada and the United States, have been clamouring for European NATO allies to do more in Afghanistan.

Mr. Petsilas said that while he believes Canadians and Americans—particularly politicians—are aware of what's happening in Kosovo, they don't fully grasp the implications.

Jean-Christophe Fleury, press counsellor at the French Embassy in Ottawa, said Canadian MPs in recent weeks and months have gained a better understanding of what his country is doing around the world, including in Kosovo.

France has 2,000 troops in Kosovo, 1,500 in Lebanon, and recently committed 2,000 additional soldiers to Chad. It currently has 1,250 troops deployed in Afghanistan, but there have been persistent reports it will send 700 more paratroopers to the country and station them in the Kandahar region.

Despite this apparent good news for Canadians, Mr. Fleury said Afghanistan is not the top foreign issue in France. In fact, he doesn't believe the French public at large knows it has been the subject of much finger pointing by other NATO allies.

"Since Afghanistan, as such, is not really an issue in the public opinion—which doesn't mean that it is not at the political or military level, don't misinterpret what I'm saying, or that parliamentarians are not aware or don't care—there is always a difference between the public opinion and the political circus," he said.

"I think in France there is probably much more reported about Kosovo than Afghanistan because it's in Europe," Mr. Fleury added. "The French public opinion is more aware of what is going on in Kosovo than other parts of the world."

Erupting violence in Chad is also garnering a lot of attention since the African nation is a former French colony, he said.

opinion processes in our countries," Mr. Höpfner said in an interview last week.

"Such debates can have a counter-productive effect in the sense that parliaments don't want to be brought under public pressure and they sometimes then react in a way that is not in the interest of the mission."

The U.S. secretary of defence, Robert Gates, has been extremely outspoken about the threat of NATO turning into a two-tiered alliance comprised of countries that are willing to fight and those that don't carry their weight. While he didn't name any specific countries, it's well-known that France, Germany, Italy and Spain are the focus.

Canadian officials, including Defence Minister Peter MacKay, have been some of the biggest critics of fellow NATO partners, but appear to have toned down their finger pointing in recent weeks.

On Sunday, CTV quoted Mr. MacKay as feeling optimistic France would contribute more troops to Afghanistan, and saying that Canada is pushing other nations to do more.

"Would we prefer that countries like Germany and Spain and others come forward?" he asked CTV. "Yes, by all means. And those discussions, those very pointed discussions took place and will continue."

Mr. Höpfner said the debate to-date has been "low-key."

"But just in the past few weeks I think we have seen a gradual heating up of that discussion and we have to keep in mind that there can be counter-productive effects in such debates."

He said he is "very optimistic that the NATO fora will pick up this discussion behind closed doors."

Germany, which has 3,200 soldiers in Afghanistan and recently took over a Quick Reaction Force in the north, is

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### **Just an Excuse: Gen. Mackenzie**

NDP Foreign Affairs critic Paul Dewar said the problems European members of NATO are facing by having to watch their own neighbourhood while contributing to Afghanistan illustrates the need to turn leadership of the mission over to the UN.

"We believe that NATO has to pull out of its role as a leader in Afghanistan right now, and that should be transitioned over to the UN as the lead institution," he said. "The very real scenario of things getting worse in Kosovo will require NATO to deal with what is, after all, the reason of its inception."

Retired Canadian lieutenant general Michel Maisonneuve, who served in Kosovo in 1998, said the problem is that Afghanistan is the top priority for NATO, while Kosovo is the largest concern facing the European Union.

He said the need to ensure an adequate European presence in the Balkans might have an impact on the ability different European NATO members have to deploy more troops to Afghanistan.

"For them, they're members of both NATO and the EU," he said. "For them it's a question of priorities, which is why it makes it difficult for [Prime Minister Stephen Harper] to find an additional 1,000 troops."

Retired lieutenant-general Lewis MacKenzie, however, was doubtful the situation in Kosovo would turn ugly, and suggested European NATO members are using the situation there as an excuse.

"There's a million troops sitting on their hands," he said of the Europeans. "Too bad they aren't in Afghanistan. There's no problem in the contingents reinforcing their troops in Kosovo...because it's safe."

The retired general, who served in the Balkans, including Sarajevo, in the early 1990s, said: "It's only when there's combat and people are getting killed where they get cold feet, which is why the alliance is in trouble."

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committed to a long-term engagement in Afghanistan, the envoy said.

However, Mr. Höpfner said Germany is against any type of rotation because it would jeopardize the progress different countries have already made in their areas of operation.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has also rejected the idea of a new mandate prior to the end of the current mandate in October. Germany renews its mission mandate on a yearly basis.

—Lee Berthiaume