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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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### **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*