

CANADA'S CHOICES

Year of the AFGHAN mission

2009 is pivotal: If we're really leaving in 2011, fine. But if we're not, consider these four options

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During last September's federal election campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a surprising declaration: Canada's military would leave not only Kandahar but all of Afghanistan in 2011. Mr. Harper had previously argued just as definitively that Canada would "not abandon" the mission because of its importance.

Surely, this decision warrants more public discussion. What role, if any, should Canada play in Afghanistan after 2011? Our political leaders may be tempted to avoid such contentious questions, or to wait until the last minute to face them. But, in doing so, they risk re-enacting the same flawed policy-making that took us to Kandahar in the first place: a crucial decision made quickly, with limited analysis and virtually no public debate of Canada's larger interests.

There would be little point in continuing Canada's commitment if the mission were destined to fail. But while the current situation in Afghanistan is not encouraging, it is not hopeless - and 2009 is shaping up to be a pivotal year, for several reasons.

First, the United States is poised to deploy large additional forces to Afghanistan. One brigade will arrive in January, and three more - amounting to roughly 20,000 troops - are expected later in the year. Many of these units will be sent to the volatile south, including Kandahar, where Canadian troops have been overstretched since they arrived in 2006.

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Some observers warn that the influx of new contingents will provoke wider fighting. Others believe they will help NATO remedy a problem that Canadians have long faced in Kandahar: finding enough soldiers to secure districts already "cleared" of insurgents, rather than allowing the Taliban to reoccupy these areas. Either way, the situation in southern Afghanistan will change dramatically in 2009.

Second, in addition to deploying more U.S. troops, which will make it possible to accelerate training of the Afghan army and police, U.S. president-elect Barack Obama has pledged to ramp up development assistance to Afghans. He also wants to launch a regional diplomatic initiative aimed at addressing the interlocking concerns of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran, whose mutual distrust has complicated stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. Further, Washington seems increasingly willing to support negotiations with "reconcilable" elements of the insurgency.

Of course, talk is cheap, but we're finally hearing the right kind of talk. Mr. Obama is espousing policy changes many Afghans and Afghanistan watchers have urged for years.

Third, in a Kabul meeting last week, a senior U.S. military official revealed plans to organize and deputize local Afghan militias in some insecure parts of the country. This strategy, to start in one district early next year, will be risky. Empowering the wrong groups could produce further feuding and warlordism.

Nevertheless, if the Afghan government supports the strategy, it should be tested. Existing policies haven't adequately prevented the spread of Taliban attacks and intimidation.

Finally, the Afghan national election scheduled for 2009 may help revitalize the stalled process of political reform. Afghans are fed up with the cronyism, corruption and ineffectiveness of their government. Whether this frustration translates into political mobilization or voter apathy remains to be seen, but elections can be powerfully (and surprisingly) transformative.

For Canada, too, 2009 may be crucial. Although 2011 seems far off, we'll soon have to decide whether to continue our Afghan engagement, and in what form if we do. NATO is already planning for the arrival of new U.S. forces in Kandahar. If we wish to carve out specific responsibilities for ourselves, we'll need to make a claim to them, probably before 2010.

Such decisions, however, presuppose serious public debate in Canada over the next year, informed by the evolving circumstances of the mission.

Apart from withdrawing our 2,700-strong contingent or simply continuing the existing deployment, four other options should be examined:

1. Move Canadian troops to safer parts of Afghanistan (although this is not where NATO forces are most needed).
2. Focus our military mission on Kandahar city and the strategically important districts of Panjwai and Zhari (which may be possible with a reduced force of about 1,800 soldiers, including support elements).
3. Keep only a garrison in Kandahar city to provide security for residents and Canadian development officials (requiring a few hundred soldiers, including support elements).
4. Shift entirely to a training mission for Afghan army and police units (the risks should not be underestimated, since trainers typically accompany their units on operations).

But first, we must decide whether it's in Canada's interest to remain in Afghanistan at all. We have no obligation to make further sacrifices, particularly if the mission's prospects do not improve. But the costs of allowing Afghanistan to collapse back into civil war would be enormous - for regional security (the stability of nuclear-armed Pakistan is at stake), for our own security (as we learned in the 1990s when al-Qaeda used Afghanistan as a base for global attacks), and not least for ordinary Afghans, who have suffered through decades of war.

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