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GORDON SMITH **Canada** became engaged in Afghanistan after 9/11, chasing down al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts. Today, more than 2,000 **Canadian** troops are engaged in a bitter conflict, and we are making our largest **development assistance** contribution in the world to Afghanistan.

Canadian objectives are worthy. The manner in which our forces fight and have died is an enormous credit to their individual courage and to our country. Nonetheless, public support for the mission is declining. Gilles Duceppe advocates that we move from our military role to one that is strictly humanitarian and developmental. Stephane Dion says he wants to reflect more on what **Canada** ought to be doing in Afghanistan, making clear he is not content with current progress.

Jack Layton and the NDP want **Canada** to cease altogether its military activities in Afghanistan.

Canadian policy toward Afghanistan is becoming something of a political football. Is this the time to bring down the government because of it? Our people in Afghanistan certainly deserve something more, and so do we all. The question is not so much the worthiness of the enterprise but whether or not what we are now doing is working.

Canada is in Afghanistan to "help stabilize the country, strengthen governance, and improve the lives of Afghans." We are doing so with a "whole of government" approach.

I believe we are not meeting our objectives and, indeed, cannot, if we remain on the present course.

Afghanistan has consistently defeated occupation by foreign armies.

Tragically, many Afghans in the turbulent south, identify **Canadians** as part of the problem, a foreign army linked with Washington, that needs to leave.

Afghanistan has never had a strong central government. Warlords and tribal leaders exercise enormous power outside Kabul.

The country has a history of tension in the balancing of power between the majority Pashtuns and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups.

Indeed, the British, as they left the Indian subcontinent more than half a century ago, wanted to leave Afghanistan weak — a late move in the Great Game. Pakistan also wants a pliant Afghanistan, as does Iran. Afghanistan does not have many friends in the region.

President Hamid Karzai has made a real effort to strengthen governance but, on top of the fragmentation of power, he is saddled with a government in which there is considerable corruption and an inability to deliver basic public services. The process of building a national police force and army has been slow --- not surprising when the Taliban can pay recruits 10 times as much.

Poppy production is at an all time high. Programs to eradicate the crop have failed over 40 years --- they destroy livelihoods and are resented.

But the drug trade provides warlords and the Taliban with significant sums of money. The West lacks a strategy to deal with this issue.

Mr. Karzai says cut Western demand --- if only we could.

The Taliban are on the increase. They have a sanctuary across the mountains in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. They are gaining ever greater support in Pakistan where they can openly raise money for weapons. Efforts to push Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and the Pakistan military have only limited effect because his government does not, and cannot, control the frontier areas.

Once the U.S. became distracted by Iraq, it was clear there would not be enough forces available to mop up al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

The moment was lost. The Taliban have now had the opportunity to remobilize. NATO forces are inadequate in number and hobbled by national restrictions on where and how they may be used.

The NATO Summit in Riga failed to make progress on these major problems.

Our armed forces have been given an extremely difficult area in which to work. While the 3 D's (defence, development and diplomacy) and the "whole of government" approach are much touted, they aren't working. Our military feel frustrated that virtually all **Canadian** assistance is going to areas other than where they are fighting --- for security reasons. Many in the aid community are fearful about the "militarization of aid." But it is clear that either CIDA, through local rural organizations, must deliver substantial assistance to the people in the Kandahar area, or the **Canadian** Forces must be authorized and funded to do so. The present divorce between our military and developmental activities must end now.

Anyone with a simple answer to these problems --- be it "steady as she goes" or "get out before it gets worse" --- does not understand the complexity and importance of the situation.

We need a serious debate about what we are trying to do, how well it is working, what else can be done, and whether a radically different approach is needed.

Gordon Smith, a former deputy minister of **Foreign Affairs**, is director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, and heads a group that will produce a report on **Canadian** policy on Afghanistan by early spring.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

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