

Gordon Smith, Centre for Global Studies, public

Second, neighbouring Pakistan "is highly ambivalent about crushing the Taliban insurgency." While technically on NATO's side in this matter, important elements of the Pakistani state apparatus, Smith writes, continue to support the Taliban as their proxy in Afghanistan – mainly as a way to fend off what they see as hostile Russian and Indian influences.

To destroy the Taliban would be to end Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, he says – which perhaps explains Islamabad's less than total support for the NATO mission.

Third, the NATO strategy of using air power and heavy armour is backfiring. So is the policy of opium eradication. One destroys Afghan lives, the other their livelihoods. The net result, writes Smith (and here he echoes reports from the London-based Senlis Council), is to make Afghans even more hostile to NATO troops.

Fourth, NATO countries don't have the will to fight a protracted war in a faraway country.

"If NATO states it will only be satisfied with a decisive military victory, the Taliban will call our bluff," Smith says. "The Taliban have demonstrated greater resolve, tactical efficiency and ability to absorb the costs of war over the long term than have NATO forces."

As a result, "talking to the Taliban" emerges as the only feasible solution. "Given the costs of war," he writes, "NATO needs to look candidly at the prospects – aware that there can be no guarantee – of a political solution."

That, in turn, would involve offering the Taliban a role in Afghanistan's government, knowing full well that they would demand as their price a more obscurantist, Islamist regime.

(This wouldn't be good news for women. But, as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission reported recently, life for many Afghan women isn't much good now – to such an extent that last year more than 200 set themselves on fire to avoid domestic abuse, forced marriage or rape by in-laws.)

Should the Taliban prove unwilling to talk, Smith writes, NATO should refocus its attention on the non-Pashtun north and, in effect, permit a return to the protracted, regionally based civil war that devastated Afghanistan in the '90s. Eventually, this might bring Mullah Omar to the bargaining table.

But if a political solution is not found, then NATO countries like Canada should think the unthinkable: We might lose; or, as Smith puts it, "there is a quite reasonable possibility that NATO may not succeed."

It's a grimly realistic paper. It's also in line with the thinking of other recent, unvarnished assessments of the Afghan war, including a report from the Senate defence committee.

Oh yes, and its key recommendation echoes that of Jack Layton. But my guess is that up in Ottawa, the people behind this war aren't going to be dismissing Smith as Taliban Gord.