

Afghanistan: Canada Must Pursue a More Independent Foreign Policy

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President Barack Obama has promised to send more troops to where the war on terrorism began as the focus seems to have now shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan. Some have went so far as to dub Afghanistan, Obama's war. A troop surge could greatly improve security for Canadian soldiers, but it is unlikely to bring any type of lasting peace or stability to the region. There is a NATO summit planned for April which will mark its 60th anniversary, where there is expected to be increased pressure for Canada to further commit beyond 2011. Canada must look past its military combat role in Afghanistan and pursue a more sovereign independent policy, one that will best assist the Afghan people and one which better represents our own values.

Obama has been critical of President George Bush's policy which focused more on Iraq at the expense of Afghanistan. With all his talk of change, Obama has demonstrated a willingness to further maintain the U.S. as the world's police force and it is unlikely that his presidency will bring about any radical shift in foreign policy. He will continue and maybe even expand the war on terrorism which could lead to Canada playing a more active role, including possible participation in future American military operations. Whether it be through NORTHCOM, the Civil Assistance Plan signed by the U.S.-Canadian military or the Security and Prosperity Partnership, the further merging of our command structures continues as does the militarization of North America.

According to the Fiscal Impact of the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan, between \$7.7-\$10.5 billion has been spent in the last six years on costs related to the mission. The total cost could reach as high as \$18.1 billion by 2011. This more than doubles what the Conservative government estimated. This is at the expense of Canadian tax payers and money that many feel should and could be better spent elsewhere, especially considering the current economic crisis. More unfortunate is the high price that Canada has paid with the loss of 107 soldiers. December of 2008 became one of the deadliest months with nine deaths. It has been reported by NATO officials that Canadians have suffered more deaths per capita than any other foreign contingent serving in Afghanistan. The number of wounded Canadian soldiers is also on the rise. Canada has about 2,500 troops positioned in southern part of the country in the Kandahar province which is considered one of the most dangerous areas in the region. Despite the best efforts of some, increasingly NATO forces along with Canadian troops are being seen as the enemy.

In spite of billions of dollars in foreign aid that has poured into Afghanistan, anti-western sentiments are growing as well as distrust of foreign troops, while support for the Hamid Karzai government is on the decline. Much of the aid has fallen into the hands of drug and warlords along with corrupt government officials. Many Afghans live in poverty and

increased violence as well as the resurgence of the Taliban is being blamed on worsening economic conditions in the country and mounting civilian casualties caused by American and NATO bombings. According to the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) the Taliban now enjoys a permanent presence in up to 70% of the country. A June 2008 poll conducted by the ICOS, formerly known as the Senlis Council, found that six out of every ten Afghans want foreign forces out of the country. There are some who believe that much like Iraq, there has been an almost deliberate ploy to keep Afghanistan unstable in order to further justify American long term military presence in the region. Canada should not be involved in nation building and wars of aggression and should most definitely not be used as an arm of the U.S. military.

It is not difficult to imagine a scenario whereby Obama, along with NATO, call upon Canada to further extend its mission in Afghanistan beyond 2011. Although it would be a hard sell, Prime Minister Stephen Harper could turn it into an issue of patriotism, a sense of duty and one which we would be turning our back on the Afghan people and the promise of democracy, if we were to leave. He has said that under no circumstances will Canada pullout before 2011. The Liberals, along with their new leader Michael Ignatieff voted for and support the current mission. In many aspects, there appears to be little difference between Ignatieff and Harper, except in rhetoric alone. Both the NDP and the Bloc Quebecois voted against extending the mission. The idea of a coalition government might be dead, but the reality is that it might have been the best opportunity to scale back our role in Afghanistan and possibly bring our troops home even sooner.

Why are Canadian troops still in Afghanistan? Is it to prop up a corrupt puppet government? Are we there to hold strategic territory for pipelines or launch pads for future military aggression? Canadian soldiers are being used as cannon fodder to maintain an already declining American empire. History recounts that another world superpower was forced to leave Afghanistan with their tail between their legs. Even with increased troop levels, American and NATO forces could be headed for the same fate. Canada desperately needs a prime minister that does not buckle under U.S. pressure and isn't afraid to pursue an independent foreign policy. Canada must return to its more traditional role as a peacekeeping nation, one which has garnered praise from the rest of the world.

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