

Afghanistan War: The Crucible for Reorienting Canadian Foreign Policy

By [David McKee](#)

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Operation Apollo, Operation Athena, Operation Archer, Operation Accius, Operation Altair ... since Canada first entered the war on Afghanistan in 2001 the list of extensions, renewals and “spin-offs” has gone on and on and on. Originally scheduled to end in 2003, Canada’s involvement in this imperialist aggression threatens to continue until 2014 if Prime Minister Stephen Harper gets his way.



Afghanistan has been the central preoccupation of Canadian foreign policy over the past decade. It has also been a main focus of peace movement activity. Mobilizations against the war in Afghanistan have not been nearly as spectacular as those against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The build up was slower, and it took more time to locate a basis of unity upon which to build mobilizations.

But, for the entire decade, opinion polls have repeatedly shown that a majority of Canadians disagree with the war. Despite massive spending on huge PR campaigns to “sell” the war to the public, and the constant ideological bombardment from the government, the military and its allied industries, and the corporate media, Canadians remain opposed to this war.

Yet successive Canadian governments (both Liberal and Conservative) have pursued a policy of war. Clearly, the state has an interest in the Afghanistan war that surpasses (and diminishes) the electoral concerns of any individual party or government. Examining and understanding this interest is key to strengthening both the anti-war effort and the broader movement for peace and progress.

Not A Localized Conflict

The advanced sections of the peace movements have long understood that the war in Afghanistan was never a localized conflict. From the get-go, it was part of a regional campaign that includes the war against Iraq and Israel’s role in the Middle East.

To overly simplify the situation, the war in Afghanistan was a key component in the drive by the United States (and its Canadian and British allies) to recolonize a huge, resource-rich area of the world. While this view is quite correct, it is obviously a truncated assessment of a much more complicated issue.

A related way of looking at things is to view the war in Afghanistan as the crucible in which a new direction in Canadian foreign policy is being tested and clarified. There are a number of elements to this policy shift:

- a deliberate and dramatic shift away from UN-oriented multilateralism toward an “ad-hoc” multilateralism. (There are many problems with the United Nations, but to replace it with makeshift “coalitions of the willing” is nothing short of gangster politics on a global scale);
- a heightened emphasis on NATO and identifying a new role for that military alliance;
- a definite move away from “traditional peacekeeping” (again, there are plenty of problems with this role and these missions, but Canada is certainly not moving toward an improved model);
- a more aggressive posture in foreign policy, with greater emphasis on military action, sanctions, terror lists, etc., instead of development, diplomacy, cooperation, and peace;
- a more brash statement of Canadian economic interests as key to foreign policy developments.

These changes are deeply at play in Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan. Perhaps the clearest example is the Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS), the Harper government’s blueprint for defence and foreign policy. The following excerpts from a 2008 Canadian Peace Congress statement on CFDS provide a sense of the scope of the reorientation in Canadian foreign policy, how tightly related it is to the war in Afghanistan, and the profound implications it has for domestic policy:

“CFDS is the manifesto of the most aggressive circles of Canadian finance capital seeking with a bigger military budget to strengthen its influence at the round tables in Washington and Brussels.

“The CFDS flaunts military power as the essential ingredient of Canadian diplomacy in international affairs. CFDS promotes the growth, modernization and combat readiness of the Canadian military and its interoperability with U.S. military forces for one main reason, to commit Canada to current and future U.S.-NATO wars, interventions and occupations as the first principle of Canadian government foreign policy. CFDS boasts of the experience gained by Canadian forces in Afghanistan as a ‘military that can operate far from home on a sustained basis.’ According to Prime Minister Harper the ability to wage war is the path that will return Canada to the international stage as a ‘credible and influential country.’

“CFDS elevates commitments to NATO, NORAD, ORTHCOM, the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) and the Civil Assistance Plan, the latter permitting U.S. troops on Canadian soil in the event of a ‘civil emergency,’ above all other Canadian international obligations and treaties. As such CFDS actually weakens Canadian sovereignty by subordinating Canadian defense policy to the global military strategy of the U.S. and NATO.

“Fear-mongering about alleged threats to Canadian security is the method used by the Conservative government to justify massive transfers of public finances, without Parliamentary approval, to foreign and domestic defence speculative expansion of the economy. This is what is meant by the ‘military partnership with Canadian industry.’

“CFDS is profoundly undemocratic and was implemented without seeking Parliamentary approval and commits \$492-billion over 20 years on top of the \$5.3-billion already allocated in 2006, approaching 2.2% of GDP, all to guarantee the profits of defence contractors and investors. The Canadian government policy of the rapid militarization of the economy is the only job creation project the Government has to offer youth, the unemployed and the under-employed. CFDS cannot be implemented without sacrificing the needs of public health care, pensions, childcare, seniors’ needs, low cost housing and the peaceful development of the country.”

To understand why the state is so committed to this sweeping reorientation of Canadian foreign policy, it is useful to review events of the past two decades.

In the early 1990s, Canada experienced a huge economic recession, exacerbated by “free trade.” The comprehensive restructuring of the Canadian economy meant that some entire sectors were decimated, while some new sectors of Canadian capital emerged and grew. Globalization in general (related to huge developments in technology) was on the rise, sparking extensive discourse about how to reorient in order to identify and exploit new global opportunities.

But the central development at this time was the sudden, unexpected collapse of the USSR and massive geopolitical changes which followed. Huge areas of the world were now “opened up” to Western capitalism (whose members were fighting amongst themselves for key positions – for a slice of the pie). At the same time, the end of the Cold War meant the sudden loss of NATO’s *raison d’être*. NATO embarked on a long search for a new identity and role, taking it to the war on Yugoslavia (which, at least immediately, was a disaster in terms of consolidating Western states around a new role for the alliance).

A key moment in the “post-Soviet” era policy debates is represented by the 1999 Symposium of the Conference of Defence Associations. The CDA advocacy group, whose membership is made up of over 50 military organizations, is large, well-funded and well-connected. Part of its funding comes from the Department of National Defence, so when CDA speaks, DND listens.

The 1999 symposium was focused on changing strategic assessment within the context of massive geopolitical shifts. Specifically, the symposium identified the following strategic issues:

- the pressing need for reorientation in Canadian foreign policy (military and economic) in light of the collapse of the USSR;
- the rise of China as a political and economic world power, a rise characterized as “the most serious challenge to Western interests in the Pacific”;
- the importance of retaining and developing NATO as a counter-balance to changing geopolitics that challenge Western interests;
- the destabilization of the central Asian states as a strategic and economic opportunity, and specific opportunities for Canada in the vast energy reserves of the central Asian region;

- the necessity for Canada to integrate military and economic issues within foreign policy discussions, in order to exert global influence and reap economic benefit;
- the government of Iraq – characterized as a “rogue state” as a barrier to securing Western interests in the central Asian region.

Virtually every one of these concerns have assumed a central place in Canadian foreign policy over the past ten years, and every one has been addressed to significant extents in the arena of the war on Afghanistan.

The Canadian state uses the war to justify, implement, test and clarify new foreign policy directions whose scope ranges far beyond that one country. For this reason, the stakes are critically high for a government that seeks to extend the war. By the same token, when the peace and anti-war movements confront the war in Afghanistan, we are engaged in a much more profound struggle, one that ultimately has a decisive role in determining our country's role in the world. Mobilization against the war must continue – it is the war that must end, now. •

David McKee is President of the [Canadian Peace Congress](#). First published in [People's Voice](#), December 1-15, 2010.

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