

We've lost sight of the mission's purpose

Driving out terrorists and rebuilding the country were the reasons Canada first went to war in Afghanistan, but things have changed and Canada is now committed to a fight it doesn't really understand, says James Travers

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OTTAWA—There's a lot of loud talk here about more than doubling defence spending over the next couple of decades. Stephen Harper should listen carefully and shop cautiously.

Why? Because wars aren't what they once were and fighting them now requires different thinking, different equipment and different definitions of success. And because the political price of failure – the price that U.S. President George W. Bush paid in recent elections – is rising so steeply that even countries with militaries as modest as Canada's need to think hard about when and how they apply force.

For all its horrors and sacrifice, war used to be relatively simple. Motivated by self-defence or self-interest, nations of similar strength and technological advancement would settle differences on the 20th century's industrialized battlefields.

The here and now of Afghanistan, Iraq and dozens of lower-profile conflicts make those titanic struggles as much a relic of the past as the rotary telephone. War, as distinguished British general Sir Rupert Smith claims, has moved from the war zones and to among the people.

If he's correct – and conflicts since Vietnam support Smith's case – then that changes almost everything. It changes the capabilities and structures armies will need, as well as what governments can realistically expect their forces to achieve. Most of all, it demands new rigour in everything from strategy and policy development to public discourse about war.

Afghanistan provides worrying evidence of just how far Canada is behind on that learning curve. It's increasingly difficult to ignore that this country, for reasons politicians preferred to obscure, recommitted troops to a conflict it didn't completely understand and still isn't fully prepared to fight successfully.

What's less unsettling and more surprising is that the reasons are obvious. It was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that Canada joined an Afghanistan mission that made sense on many levels. In providing safe haven for Al Qaeda, the Taliban regime became a security threat to Europe as well as North America, and helping the U.S. remove it from power was in Canada's defence and cross-border interests.

That decision only began losing clarity in 2005 when then-prime minister Paul Martin reluctantly agreed to send troops to turbulent Kandahar. Along with aiding Afghanistan, that second commitment took on the extra burden of demonstrating to the U.S. that Canada would stand by its side even if it wouldn't join the Bush administration's Iraq invasion.

Other decisions helped reshape the national perspective. As a critical first step to building the leaner, lighter, more mobile military needed for modern conflicts, Liberals that year named Rick Hillier as Canada's top general, and the chief of the defence staff responded by startling the country with tough talk about killing "scumbags."

Whatever the mission's merits, Canadians began losing sight of its purpose. Was it, as Hillier suggested and Conservative Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor now says, "retribution?" Or was it reconstruction?

The difference is enormous, the answer pivotal. As Smith argues in *The Utility of Force*, his seminal work on the art of modern war, countries must be brutally frank with themselves about why they are putting their troops and treasury at risk.

Canada has yet to subject itself to that crucible. Instead, successive administrations have set wildly optimistic targets that the current mission, limited by size and commitment, can't hit.

Winning a decisive military victory in Afghanistan is now no more likely than it is that the country's 30-year civil war will end in the miracle birth of a stable, lasting democracy. While politicians continue to hold

out hope for both, a tried-and-true formula predicts it won't be so.

Bitter experience and academic analysis demonstrate that security and stability can only be created when minimum troop and economic assistance thresholds are crossed. An Afghanistan coalition that lost much of its momentum when the U.S. shifted attention to Iraq falls short of those standards by at least 50,000 troops and police, as well as by more than \$1 billion in annual financial help.

Prospects for Afghanistan would still be bleak even if those higher standards were reached. Geography makes Afghanistan a Rubik's cube of competing interests. What solution to the current conflict could possibly satisfy Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran, let alone Afghanistan's perpetually warring factions and the U. S.?

The obvious response is "none." But the answer is not necessarily to just walk away. Along with failing to deal with the Taliban or Al Qaeda, retreat would abandon some of the world's poorest people.

Holding the current course is no more appealing. There's little reason to expect it will lead to anything other than more of the same by 2009 when Canada's current commitment ends.

While hardly a panacea, the place to start searching for better solutions is in a more candid debate. Instead of continuing to promise what can't or won't be delivered, the Prime Minister should level with Canadians about what can reasonably be achieved in Afghanistan and what it will cost in lives and dollars.

That wouldn't be easy for any minority government and it will be particularly difficult for one that has imported Washington's good-versus-evil rhetoric. Nor would it be easy for opposition parties, particularly Liberals who aren't quite sure where they now stand, to opt for constructive criticism over scoring easy partisan points.

Mounting pressure for higher defence spending only underscores the urgent need for political courage. In the coming budget as well as in the military's long-delayed capital spending plan, the federal government must make defence and security decisions Canada will live or die with for decades.

Nothing has been confirmed, but what has been leaked is worrying. After previously deciding wisely on equipment that would be useful in fighting wars among the people and foolishly on big-ticket items of dubious value, the defence minister is now potentially in the market for everything from tanks to fighter aircraft and Arctic icebreakers.

Some sympathy for the government's purchasing dilemmas comes from an unusual source. Former Liberal defence minister Bill Graham says the unexpected need for some equipment in Afghanistan, notably scrap-heap-ready Leopard tanks, as well as the unpredictable nature of evolving conflicts, make procurement a confusing puzzle.

But it's a puzzle the Harper administration must solve soon. An economy Canada's size can't afford a do-everything military and still adequately fund other pressing national priorities.

That's a critical consideration for the Prime Minister. As EKOS pollster and analyst Frank Graves points out, the strongest support for a bigger military budget and for the Afghanistan mission almost perfectly matches the core Conservative consistency. But other voters, the ones Harper needs to attract if he is to win a majority, are skeptical about both and attach higher priority to the environment, health, education and economic competitiveness.

"There was a sense the military had been allowed to atrophy and had to be repaired," Graves says. "But that's seen as being done and people don't see any tangible benefit for themselves in defence spending."

Still, the toughest decision facing Harper and O'Connor is not between competing national needs. It's in choosing the most appropriate military for a country still on the doorstep of an already troubled millennium.

Anyone who runs a moist finger down the arms shopping list will spot not just options but competing philosophy. Does Canada gamble that not much has really changed and arm itself for guarding sovereignty and territory? Or does it assume the central challenge of at least the next few decades will be protecting people at home by sending the military abroad, a decision that would tilt capabilities toward counter-insurgency, state stabilization and security?

Being Canadian means compromise is always magnetic. But Afghanistan is now a constant reminder that half measures are inadequate when the conflict is complex and far from home.

What's clear to Smith, and should be clear to us, is that war among the people demands a different military, a new suite of development and diplomatic policies, and an honest debate.

