

**Mr. Harper Goes to War:  
Canada, Afghanistan, and the Return of “High Politics” in  
Canadian Foreign Policy**

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**Introduction**

During the January 2006 federal election campaign, foreign policy, and especially the war in Afghanistan, was noticeably absent. Yet, by the spring of 2006, Afghanistan had suddenly emerged as Canada’s biggest foreign policy debate since the Canada-US free trade debate of 1987-88. Public opinion is split over the Afghanistan mission, and there are deep divisions between, and within, Canada’s political parties. Afghanistan is now Canada’s number one foreign policy commitment with billions of dollars being spent, the establishment of a permanent diplomatic presence in the country, and dozens of Canadian lives being lost. Explaining how and why Afghanistan has become the number one issue in Canadian foreign policy, is the primary task of this paper, but it is not the only task. The Afghanistan case study will also be used to illustrate the theoretical aspect of this paper. It is argued here that Canadian foreign policy has undergone a transformation that is more significant than just a change of government from the Liberals to the Conservatives. Since the election of Stephen Harper, Canadian foreign policy has been reoriented away from economic and social policies towards defence and security policies.

Political scientists specializing in international relations have long distinguished between high politics and low politics. High politics are issues relating to military, security, defence relations between states. Low politics are issues relating to economic, social, demographic, and environmental relations between states and non-state actors. Beginning with the Trudeau government in 1968, Canadian foreign policy has been preoccupied with low politics. Foreign economic policy was pursued through Trudeau’s Foreign Investment Review Agency (FIRA), the Third Option, and the National Energy Program (NEP); Mulroney’s free trade agreements with the United States and Mexico; and Chrétien’s Team Canada trade summits. Foreign environmental policy was pursued through Trudeau’s 160km offshore pollution prevention zone; Mulroney’s acid rain treaty and the Montreal Protocol; and Chrétien’s Kyoto Protocol. Human rights policy was pursued through Trudeau’s increased use of human rights rhetoric and setting up of human rights offices in the Department of External Affairs (DEA) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA); Mulroney’s opposition to South African apartheid; and Chrétien’s human security agenda. While this frenzied activity in the low politics sphere was going on, the traditional elements of high politics (military and diplomatic power) were left to languish.

This cursory look at the key foreign policy decisions of the last 40 years shows the emphasis on low politics. Keen observers of Canadian foreign policy have made the same point. According to Denis Stairs, “Canada’s *real* foreign policy – the foreign policy grounded in deeply rooted constituency interests, the foreign policy that drives out other

foreign policies whenever those other policies get in the way, the foreign policy which the cabinet as a whole truly cares, the foreign policy to which domestic political imperatives ultimately apply – is Canada's *economic* foreign policy."<sup>1</sup> Former Liberal Trade Minister Roy MacLaren was even blunter when he stated that "foreign policy is trade policy."<sup>2</sup> Even when security issues would percolate to the top, a low politics spin was often placed on them. For example when Lloyd Axworthy was foreign minister (1996-2000) he emphasized human security, which expanded the notion of security to include human rights, environmental protection, food security, and economic security.<sup>3</sup> In the process, traditional notions of security were devalued.

Under Stephen Harper's Conservative government, Canadian foreign policy has been transformed into an emphasis on high politics. The most obvious example, and the topic of this paper, is Afghanistan. Outside of the Afghanistan file, the Harper government has pursued a high politics agenda in a number of significant ways. First, it took concrete steps to rebuild the Canadian military after decades of neglect. The 2006 and 2007 budgets allocated an increase of \$1.1 billion a year in core funding for the military.<sup>4</sup> The government also addressed procurement, with purchases worth \$17.1 billion on strategic and tactical airlift planes and helicopters, supply ships, and transport trucks.<sup>5</sup> This was followed up in April 2007 with the purchase of up to 100 Leopard 2 tanks from the Netherlands and the rental of 20 Leopard 2A6 tanks from Germany.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Harper government has sought to protect Canada's Arctic sovereignty. During the 2006 election campaign, Harper promised to purchase new icebreakers to patrol the Arctic waters and got into a war of words with the US Ambassador over jurisdiction of the Northwest Passage.<sup>7</sup> Once in power, the Canadian Forces initiated regular military patrols of the Arctic.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the Harper government has been changing the mandate of Canada's diplomatic corps. The previous Liberal governments were focused on cultural diplomacy – gaining visibility for Canadian authors, painters, musicians, architecture, etc. This was particularly evident in Europe. Under the Harper government, career diplomats were appointed as Ambassadors, a shift from the traditional former politicians who tended to show up in London, Paris, and Rome. These diplomatic professionals were also given a mandate to shift away from cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Stairs, "The changing office and the changing environment of the minister of foreign affairs in the Axworthy era," in Fen Osler Hampson, Martin Rudner, and Maureen Appel Molot, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2001: The Axworthy Legacy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Andrew Cohen, *While Canada Slept: How we lost our place in the world* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Axworthy, *Navigating a New World: Canada's Global Future* (Knopf: Toronto, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Department of National Defence, "Budget 2006 and the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces" accessed online at [http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Reports/budget06/index\\_e.asp](http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Reports/budget06/index_e.asp) on August 11, 2006. Department of National Defence, "Defence and Budget 2007: Highlights," accessed online at [http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Reports/budget\\_2007/index\\_e.asp](http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Reports/budget_2007/index_e.asp) on April 30, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Defence, "Canada First Defence Procurement" accessed online at [http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Focus/first/index\\_e.asp](http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Focus/first/index_e.asp) on August 11, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Department of National Defence, "Protection the top priority with tank acquisition," *News Release* (April 12, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Harper, "Harper Stands Up for Arctic Sovereignty," (December 22, 2005), accessed online at [www.conservative.ca/media/20051222-Speech-Harper-Winnipeg.pdf](http://www.conservative.ca/media/20051222-Speech-Harper-Winnipeg.pdf) on May 2, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Department of National Defence, "CF operation demonstrates value of interagency cooperation in Canada's Arctic" (April 27, 2007) accessed online at <http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/> on May 2, 2007.

diplomacy and to refocus attention on security issues. As James R. Wright, Canada's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, explained, "the whole defence and security complex of issues is very important to the role of the High Commission now....And that is different from when I was here 10 years ago. Afghanistan is a critically important file...Counterterrorism has also grown in importance."<sup>9</sup>

This process of moving from low politics to high politics, it could be argued, began earlier under the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin in their collective response to the realities of a post-9/11 world. It is true that both Chrétien and Martin struggled with the high politics issues of terrorism, the Iraq war, and American missile defence, as well as Afghanistan, but their foreign policy preoccupations remained in the low politics sphere. For example, even after 9/11, the Chrétien government's focus was on pushing an Africa Agenda at the G-8 and ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. Meanwhile, the shortlived Martin government's priorities were on human rights in Sudan, the responsibility to protect, and integrating the G-8 with key developing countries through the Leaders 20 summit (L20).

### **Background**

Prior to September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was one of the few places in the world that lacked any sort of Canadian connection. It was not until 1968 that Canada established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. These were severed in 1979 as a result of the Soviet invasion. Canada is both a country of immigrants and a trading nation, but there were few immigrants from Afghanistan and even less bilateral trade. Even foreign aid to a country stricken by almost continuous warfare was less than \$10 million a year. It was not until planes starting crashing into the World Trade Center that Afghanistan appeared on Ottawa's radar.

Canada became engaged with Afghanistan for two factors. The 9/11 terror attacks were seen as an attack not just on the United States, but on the Western world (Canada included) as a whole. Over 30 Canadians died that day in the World Trade Center. While it was seen as undiplomatic, there was a lot of truth in Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor remarks that Canada went to Afghanistan in "retribution" for the 9/11 attacks.<sup>10</sup> A second reason was that the invasion of Afghanistan was supported by Canada's three most important allies: the United States, the United Nations, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When the 9/11 attacks started to happen, the United States immediately went into a defensive posture, clearing its airspace and shutting down its borders. However, once the initial shock of the attacks started to reside, Washington began to prepare for an offensive attack aimed at the Al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and their Taliban hosts. US action was given official authorization by both the UN and NATO. The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1368 which classified the terrorist attacks as a threat to international peace and security and recognized the "inherent right of individual or collective self-defence."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, NATO, for the very first time, invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty which calls

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<sup>9</sup> Doug Saunders, "Stephen's man in London and the new tough-love diplomacy," *The Globe and Mail* (March 10, 2007), F3.

<sup>10</sup> "Fighting blamed on 'retribution,'" *Toronto Star* (22 January 2007).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, *Security Council Resolution 1368 (2001)*, 12 September 2001.

for collective self-defence.<sup>12</sup> This obliged all member countries, including Canada, to assist the United States with all means necessary.

There have been three major decisions that Canada has made regarding its commitment in Afghanistan. The first decision was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The Chrétien government, in October 2001, deployed its special forces unit, the JTF-2, and 750 ground troops from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry to assist US efforts in killing and capturing Al-Qaeda and Taliban members. This was not a peacekeeping mission like Cyprus or the Golan Heights. It was not even a more robust second generation peacekeeping mission like Bosnia or Somalia. This was a war. This was the first time since the Korean War of the early 1950s that Canadian troops were deployed into an explicit ground war. While these were the only Canadian Forces (CF) in Afghanistan, there were additional naval and air surveillance assets stationed in the Arabian Sea. In total, Canada deployed almost three thousand soldiers in response to the 9/11 attacks. The second decision occurred in February 2003 when the Chrétien government sent 1700 ground troops to Kabul as part of NATO's International Stabilization Assistance Force (ISAF). Their mandate was to provide security assistance to the interim Afghan government and prepare for Presidential and Parliamentary elections. The third decision occurred in May 2005 when the Martin government announced the withdrawal of its forces from Kabul and their re-deployment in Kandahar in February 2006. The CF would form one of the provincial reconstruction teams that would be assigned to different NATO countries and would be spread out across Afghanistan. Since Kandahar was the most dangerous province, the CF was also given significantly enhanced combat responsibilities. While all of the above decisions were made by Stephen Harper's predecessors as Prime Minister, the issue has become inseparable to Harper. Harper has made the war in Afghanistan his own, and the Canadian public will hold him accountable for the success or failure of the mission.

The Canadian government has been using the 3-D approach as the instrument to address the situation in Afghanistan. The 3-D approach involves the co-ordination of the Department of Foreign Affairs (diplomacy), Department of National Defence (defence), and the Canadian International Development Agency (development). This approach was put to the test in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Canadian diplomats have been assisting the Afghan government in rebuilding its public institutions after over a quarter century of war. Canadian aid workers, both through CIDA and international NGOs, have undertaken humanitarian projects that include road construction, counter-narcotics, and de-mining. The Canadian Forces job is to provide a secure environment that would allow the other two groups to succeed in their work. Within the defence aspect of the 3-D approach, the Canadian Army has adopted the concept of three-block warfare. "On the first block of the three-block war, we will deliver humanitarian aid or assist others in doing that. On the second, we will conduct stabilization or peace support operations. On the third, we will be engaged in a high-intensity fight. We must be ready to conduct these operations simultaneously and very close to one another. We must be prepared to conduct them in

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<sup>12</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Statement by the North Atlantic Council (Invocation Article V - attacks on US)," *Press Release (2001) 124*, 12 September 2001.

<sup>13</sup> See DFAIT, 'Rebuilding Afghanistan', accessed online at <http://www.canada-afghanistan.gc.ca/menu-en.asp> on October 15, 2005.

large urban centres and complex terrain.”<sup>14</sup> In Afghanistan, the Canadian Army has been working simultaneously in all three blocks: assisting CIDA in the distribution of millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance; providing training for the Afghan National Army and Police; and engaging in fierce fire fights against elements of the Taliban.

The 9/11 attacks explain why Canada initially went to Afghanistan, but it does not completely explain why Canada has stayed. According to Ottawa, “Canada is in Afghanistan at the request of the democratically-elected government of Afghanistan as part of a UN-sanctioned mission to help build a stable, democratic and self-sufficient society.”<sup>15</sup> This is broadened into three intertwined goals:

- Help the government of Afghanistan and its people to build a stable, peaceful and self-sustaining democratic country
- Provide the people of Afghanistan with the hope for a brighter future by establishing the security necessary to promote development
- Defend Canadian interests at home and abroad by preventing Afghanistan from relapsing into a failed state that provides a safe haven for terrorists and terrorist organizations.<sup>16</sup>

These three objectives have been summarized to a simple slogan, headlined on the special Canada-Afghanistan website: “protecting Canadians rebuilding Afghanistan.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Why has Afghanistan become Mr. Harper’s War?**

As the previous section indicated, Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan predated Harper’s election. So the question is: what was the process by which Afghanistan has become associated with Harper in the minds of Canadians? After remaining silent about Afghanistan throughout the 2005-2006 election campaign, Harper made his feelings known on the day after the election. “We will continue to help defend our values and democratic ideals around the world – as so courageously demonstrated by those young Canadian soldiers who are serving and who have sacrificed in Afghanistan.”<sup>18</sup> The attention on Afghanistan by the new Harper government was intensified with his surprise visit in March 2006. The destination for a new prime minister’s first international visit is important. It highlights the key priority for Canada’s foreign policy. Most prime ministers select New York and Washington to show the importance of Canada-US bilateral relations. However, Harper went to Afghanistan. The symbolic values of this trip cannot be overstated.

When a prime minister travels, he brings along the national media. Not the few foreign correspondents that the Canadian media still utilize, but the much larger parliamentary press gallery as well as some special feature reporters. Harper’s visit provided an opportunity to educate a Canadian media which, in general, was weak and

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<sup>14</sup> Department of National Defence, “Three-Block War,” in *A Soldier’s Guide to Transformation*. Available at: <http://www.army.forces.gc.ca>.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, “Protecting Canadians Rebuilding Afghanistan,” Accessed online at <http://geo.international.gc.ca/cip-pic/afghanistan/menu-en.asp> on May 3, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Canadian Forces, “Backgrounder: Military Strengthens its Reconstruction and Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan,” Accessed online at <http://www.forces.gc.ca> on March 15, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> <http://geo.international.gc.ca/cip-pic/afghanistan/menu-en.asp>

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in John Kirton, “Harper’s ‘Made in Canada’ Global Leadership,” in Andrew F. Cooper and Dane Rowlands, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2006: Minorities and Priorities* (McGill-Queen’s University Press: Montreal and Kingston, 2006), 37.

uninformed about war coverage. This magnified and broadened the media coverage of the Afghan mission. Prior to Harper's visit, coverage of Afghanistan was sporadic. There were occasional trips by high profile Canadian journalists like Peter Mansbridge and Kevin Newman, but there was little sustained coverage. After Harper's trip, journalists had a better frame of reference in describing stories from Afghanistan because they had been in the field. For example, Christie Blatchford of the *Globe and Mail* and Rosie DiManno of the *Toronto Star* (neither of them with experience in either international relations or military matters) stayed after Harper's visit and published many human interest stories about the Canadian forces and aid workers.

In his speech to Canadian troops during his March 2006 visit, Harper stated quite clearly that "it's never easy for the men and women on the front lines. And there may be some who want to cut and run. But cutting and running is not your way. It's not my way. And it's not the Canadian way. We don't make a commitment and then run away at the first sign of trouble. We don't and we won't."<sup>19</sup> Since that time, Harper has often repeated many of these types of phrases. During the May 2006 debate on expanding Canada's operation in Afghanistan to February 2009, Harper warned that "Canada is not immune to such [terror] attacks. And we will never be immune as long as we are a society that defends freedom, democracy and human rights. Not surprisingly, Al-Qaeda has singled out Canada along with a number of other nations for attack. The same Al-Qaeda that, together with the Taliban, took an undemocratic Afghanistan and made it a safe haven from which to plan terrorist attacks worldwide... we just cannot let the Taliban, backed by Al-Qaeda, or similar extremist elements return to power in Afghanistan."<sup>20</sup> In September 2006, during an address to the United Nations General Assembly, Harper maintained that "if we fail the Afghan people, we will be failing ourselves. For this is the United Nations strongest mission and, therefore, our greatest test. Our collective will and credibility are being judged. We cannot afford to fail. We will succeed."<sup>21</sup>

There have been many critics of Harper's language. In response, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade evaluated the communication strategy – including Harper's use of words – about Afghanistan in November 2006. A series of cross-country focus groups reported that many Canadians, in fact, believed that Harper was "echoing" US President George W. Bush's description of the war in Iraq. The report recommended that the Conservative government avoid emphasizing values like freedom, democracy, liberty, because it "comes across as sounding too American." Instead, they should emphasize phrases like "rebuilding, restoring, reconstruction, hope, opportunity, and enhancing the lives of women and children."<sup>22</sup>

In a sense, Harper was not echoing Bush, but the previous Liberal government. In the week after 9/11, Chrétien defended war as an instrument to "destroy the evil of

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Harper, "Address by the Prime Minister to the Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan," (March 13, 2006). Accessed online at <http://www.pm.gc.ca> on April 10, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Harper, "Prime Minister stands by Canada's commitment to Afghanistan," (17 May 2006). Accessed online at <http://www.pm.gc.ca> on May 2, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Harper, "Address by the Prime Minister to the 61<sup>st</sup> Opening Session of the United Nations General Assembly" (21 September 2006). Accessed online at <http://www.pm.gc.ca> on May 2, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> This internal report was described in Allan Woods, "To sell Canada on war, try 'hope' but not 'liberty,'" *Toronto Star* (February 17, 2007).

terrorism.”<sup>23</sup> In the summer of 2005, Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, who was appointed to the top job by Paul Martin, described Taliban and Al Qaeda forces as “detestable murderers and scumbags.” Hillier also emphasized that the Canadian Forces are “not the public service of Canada, we’re not just another department. We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.”<sup>24</sup> In the Fall of 2005, former Liberal Defence Minister Bill Graham, during his “body bag” speaking tour preparing Canadians for the mission in Kandahar, warned that “Canadians should not have illusions: this is a very complex, very demanding, and very dangerous mission. The region in Afghanistan where our troops will be deployed is one of the most unstable and dangerous in the country. In fact, that is the reason why we’ve been asked to go, and why we’ve accepted.”<sup>25</sup>

Critics of Harper may focus on his more forceful language, but they neglect the clear linkages that he makes between the Afghanistan operation and Canadian values. While in Afghanistan, Harper made it clear that “serving in a UN-mandated, Canadian-led security operation...is in the very best of the Canadian tradition.” Harper went on to assert that “reconstruction is reducing poverty; millions of people are now able to vote; women are enjoying greater rights and economic opportunities that could not have been imagined under the Taliban regime; and of Afghan children who are now in school studying the same things Canadian kids are learning back home.” Harper concluded that these tasks demonstrated that this involved “standing up for...core Canadian values.”<sup>26</sup> The promotion of Canadian values is not a Conservative idea, but was initiated by the Liberals. Jean Chrétien’s 1995 foreign policy review and Paul Martin’s 2005 International Policy Statement both stated that Canadian foreign policy was based on three pillars: physical security, economic prosperity, and the promotion of Canadian values.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the similar use of language, the Harper government was criticized for having its Afghanistan policy really being about improving US relations. The argument was made that Harper’s Afghanistan was the same as Bush’s Iraq. However, it could be argued that, this linkage with US relations, had always been present, and that it existed prior to Harper’s election. Then-Liberal Defence Minister John McCallum explained the decision to deploy troops to Kabul in February 2003 was due, in part, to avoid making a military commitment to Iraq. According to McCallum, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was “fully cognizant of the fact that this mission limits the deployment of Canadian land forces to other parts of the world for well over a year.” This was echoed by Michael Kergin, Canada’s Ambassador to the United States, when he said that the 2005 decision to deploy Canadian troops to Kandahar was linked to the failure to send troops to Iraq in 2003. “There was this sense that we had let the side down [in Iraq]...and

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Kent Roach, *September 11: Consequences for Canada* (McGill-Queen’s University Press: Montreal and Kingston, 2003), 150.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Daniel Leblanc, “JTF2 to hunt al-Qaeda,” *The Globe and Mail* (15 July 2005), A1.

<sup>25</sup> Minister of National Defence Bill Graham, “The Canadian Forces Mission in Afghanistan—Canadian Policy and Values in Action”, *Minister’s Speech* (Montreal: 22 September 2005).

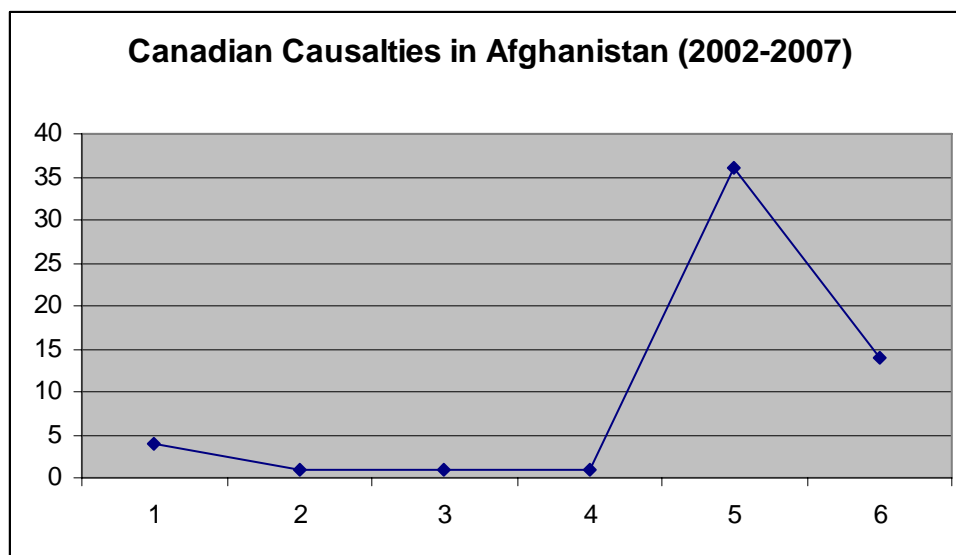
<sup>26</sup> Stephen Harper, “Address by the Prime Minister to the Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan,” (March 13, 2006). Available at <http://www.pm.gc.ca>

<sup>27</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *Canada in the World* (Ottawa: DFAIT, 1995) and Canada, *Canada’s International Policy Statement, A Role of Pride and Influence in the World* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2005).

then there was the sense that we could be more helpful, militarily, by taking on a role in Afghanistan.”<sup>28</sup> Fully entangling the Canada-American dimension from the Afghanistan mission is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that this was not unique to the Harper government.

A further reason why Afghanistan has become Mr. Harper’s war is because the largest amount of Canadian casualties occurred on his watch. From 2002-2005, 8 Canadians died in Afghanistan, but in 2006, 35 Canadian soldiers and 1 diplomat were killed in action (see Table One). These increased casualties have made Afghanistan the bloodiest Canadian conflict since the Korean War. When Canadians started to die, both media coverage and public interest in Afghanistan was heightened. The public has a notoriously short attention span, so when the death toll climbed in Afghanistan they looked to the government of the day for an explanation. The fact that Canadian Forces had been in Afghanistan since 2002 was ignored. It should also be noted that public opinion was incredibly volatile on the Afghanistan operation.<sup>29</sup> When Canadians were killed, opinion towards the operation plummeted, but when things would go quiet, support for the operation would climb. For example, the lowest level of support was in July 2006, a month when 10 Canadians were killed. In contrast, the highest level of support was in September 2006, when stories of success were more common.

**TABLE ONE**



In the midst of the heavy fighting, Harper both extended and expanded Canada’s mandate in Afghanistan. In the process, he made it clear that he was taking ownership of the operation. On May 17, 2006, Harper pushed a motion through the House of Commons to extend Canada’s participation in ISAF, which was due to expire in February 2007, until 2009. In response to the sustained fighting, the Harper government in

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in J.L. Granatstein, *Whose War is it? How Canada can survive in the post-9/11 world* (Harper Collins: Toronto, 2007), 91-92.

<sup>29</sup> Ipsos Reid, “Despite Recent Troops Fatalities, Majority of Canadians (52%) Support Role of Canada’s Troops in Afghanistan,” News Release (April 24, 2007). Accessed online at <http://www.ipsos-na.com> on May 16, 2007.



September 2006, also increased the military commitment: i) increasing the size & strength of the CF to 2,500; ii) adding an additional infantry company (250 soldiers); iii) deploying a Leopard tank squadron; iv) adding a counter-mortar capability; and v) including military engineers (and an armoured engineering vehicle) to enhance the PRT's capability to manage quick impact reconstruction and development projects.<sup>30</sup> The combination of increased Canadian casualties and the corresponding increase to the CF had critics of Harper complain that he was militarizing the mission at the expense of development work.

### **Explaining Harper's Motivation**

Stephen Harper had very little international experience, or even interest, before becoming prime minister. In his previous political jobs within the Reform Party, National Citizens Coalition, and Canadian Alliance, his focus was on reforming Canadian federalism, reducing the size of government, cutting taxes, and eliminating the government's deficit and debt.<sup>31</sup> This lack of interest in foreign affairs extended to much of his caucus. Beyond Gordon O'Connor (who had been a Brigadier General in the Canadian Forces), and David Emerson (a former Liberal Industry Minister who had worked on the softwood lumber file), there were few Conservatives who had had any international responsibilities prior to forming the government.<sup>32</sup> Therefore it was not a surprise that there were no international dimensions to his famous five campaign priorities (accountability, lower taxes, crime, child care, and health care). What, then, explains his decision to make Afghanistan the centre-piece of his foreign policy?

First, there has been a change in the importance of national security among Canadians since 9/11. It is clear that Canadians support for the military has increased since 9/11. This began almost immediately, for instance in the days after the terrorist attacks, Canadian recruiting centres were swamped by applicants.<sup>33</sup> In the weeks after 9/11, polls showed that almost three-quarters of Canadians supported Canada joining the United States in its war on terror.<sup>34</sup> 9/11 also created the conditions for an increase in military spending after years of downsizing. The Chrétien government passed anti-terror legislation, put money into border security, and added a couple of billion dollars to the CF's budget, and announced plans for increasing its force strength. These measures were

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<sup>30</sup> Department of National Defence, "Military Strengthens its Reconstruction and Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan," *News Release* (September 15, 2006). Accessed online at <http://www.forces.gc.ca> on May 16, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> There have been two book-length biographies on Stephen Harper, and both describe Harper's lack of intellectual engagement in international relations and Canadian foreign policy. See: William Johnson, *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada* (McClelland & Stewart: Toronto, 2005) and Lloyd Mackey, *The Pilgrimage of Stephen Harper* (ECW Press: Toronto, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> O'Connor and Emerson were made Ministers of Defence and Trade respectively; the remaining international ministries would be run by international neophytes who were chosen for domestic political reasons. Peter MacKay, the former Progressive Conservative leader, was named Minister of Foreign Affairs Minister and Josée Verner, a francophone female, was named Minister of International Cooperation.

<sup>33</sup> Roach, *September 11: Consequences for Canada*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> Ipsos Reid, "While Majority (73%) Agree that Canada Should Join the United States and Also Declare War on International Terrorism it is Conditional as Support Falls to Just Over Half (54%) if War Exposes Canadian Civilians to Attack by Terrorists," *News Release* (September 21, 2001). Accessed online at <http://www.ipsos-na.com> on May 16, 2007.

soon followed up on by the Martin government. Thus, Harper was not initiating a movement towards greater emphasis on security issues, but was simply capitalizing on emerging trends within Canadian society.

The party platforms of the Reform Party, Canadian Alliance, and the merged Conservative Party, were weak on foreign policy. Nevertheless, starting with the formation of the Reform Party in 1987, its members were clear on two key foreign policy principles: better relations with the United States and a stronger Canadian military. These two themes cropped up over and over again in their attacks on the Liberals. An example of the intertwining of these two issues was a major speech delivered soon after Harper became leader of the Canadian Alliance. Harper argued that “for nine years the government has systematically neglected the Canadian forces and undermined our ability to contribute to peace enforcement and even peacekeeping operations, including recently our premature withdrawal from Afghanistan. Most recently we have been inclined to offer knee-jerk resistance to the United States on national missile defence despite the fact that Canada is confronted by the same threats from rogue nations equipped with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction as is the United States.”<sup>35</sup>

Stephen Harper, as director of policy for the Reform Party, had been very critical of the domestic policies of the Mulroney government (Meech Lake and Charlottetown, deficit/debt), but he praised Mulroney’s foreign policy. In particular, Mulroney’s ability to manage Canada-US relations was singled out. Mulroney’s role in achieving the Canada-US free trade agreement was an obvious reference point, but Harper also wanted to show that Mulroney (and implicitly, Harper too) could also stand up to the Americans. Therefore, Harper would frequently invoke Mulroney’s leadership (later acknowledged by Nelson Mandela) in the fight against South African apartheid. Harper would make it clear that Mulroney was capable of “disagreeing with the United States without being disagreeable, without in any way jeopardizing our bilateral relationship.”<sup>36</sup> This was in direct contrast to some insulting statements by the Liberal government towards the Bush administration during the debate over participation in the Iraq War. What Harper was saying was that a Conservative government would follow the practice of the Mulroney government in its handling of Canada-US relations. Mulroney, according to Harper “understood a fundamental truth. He understood that mature and intelligent Canadian leaders must share the following perspective: the United States is our closest neighbour, our best ally, our biggest customer, and our most consistent friend.”<sup>37</sup>

Harper’s foreign policy ideas started to crystallize during the debate about Canadian participation in the US-Iraq War. Many of his comments on Iraq would foreshadow his actions in Afghanistan. Harper devoted his maiden speech as leader of the Canadian Alliance in October 2002 to discussing the buildup to war in Iraq. “The time has come for Canada to pledge support to the developing coalition of nations, including Britain, Australia, and the United States, determined to send a clear signal to Saddam Hussein that failure to comply with an unconditional program of inspection, as spelled out in either new or existing UN resolutions, would justify action to ensure the safety of millions of people in the region from Iraq’s suspected weapons of mass destruction.” Harper went on to add that if the Liberal government did not support military action

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada*, 316.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Mackey, *The Pilgrimage of Stephen Harper*, 173-174.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Stephen Harper and the Future of Canada*, 316.

against Iraq it would be undermining “Canada’s reputation with its allies and does nothing to uphold the credibility of the United Nations by not joining in sending a clear message to Hussein that failure to comply will bring consequences.”<sup>38</sup> A few months later, when war was looking more and more imminent, Harper reminded the House of Commons of Canada’s previous participation in wars and criticized the Liberals for making decisions on war and peace via public opinion polls and focus groups. In contrast, a Harper government would “take our position the way real leaders and great nations make decisions at such moments in history.”<sup>39</sup> Finally, in an April 25, 2003 speech, one month after the start of the US-led war against Iraq, Harper stated that the “emerging debates on foreign affairs should be fought on moral grounds. Current challenges in dealing with terrorism and its sponsors, as well as the emerging debate on the foals of the United States as the sole superpower, will be well served by conservative insights on preserving historic values and moral insights on right and wrong.... Conservatives must take the moral stand, with our allies, in favour of the fundamental values of society, including democracy, free enterprise, and individual freedom. This moral stand should not just give us the right to stand with our allies, but the duty to do so and the responsibility to put “hard power” behind our international commitments.”<sup>40</sup>

In his speeches on Iraq, Harper touched on a number of themes that would become important with respect to Afghanistan. First, Canada should support its allies. Canada went to Afghanistan in support of the United States, the United Nations, and NATO – its most important bilateral partner and its most important multilateral alliances. A second theme was the need for Canada to be a world leader. During his trip to Afghanistan, Harper would assert that he wanted “an international leadership role for our country. Not carping from the sidelines, but taking a stand on the big issues that matter.”<sup>41</sup> A third theme was the promotion of Canadian values like democracy and freedom. In Harper’s election night victory address, he stated that “we will continue to help defend our values and democratic ideals around the world – as so courageously demonstrated by those young Canadian soldiers who are serving and who have sacrificed in Afghanistan.”<sup>42</sup> The final theme was the need for hard power, like military force, to achieve foreign policy objectives. Harper would frequently argue that the Taliban remained a security challenge in Afghanistan and that was “threatening the well-being and economic development and social development of the people of Afghanistan.”<sup>43</sup>

Harper also hoped to use participation in Afghanistan to reengage Canada on the world stage. Many foreign policy observers have noticed a precipitous drop in Canada’s global influence.<sup>44</sup> While in Afghanistan, Harper asserted that the operation was “about

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<sup>38</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 1 October 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 29 January 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Mackey, *The Pilgrimage of Stephen Harper*, 169-170.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Harper, “Address by the Prime Minister to the Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan,” (March 13, 2006). Accessed online at <http://www.pm.gc.ca> on April 10, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Harper, “Canadians Choose Change and Accountability” (23 January 2006) accessed online at <http://www.conservative.ca> on May 2, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> CTV, “Think tank calls for new approach in Afghanistan,” (24 October 2006). Accessed online at <http://www.ctv.ca> on May 2, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Cohen has provided the most comprehensive examination of this fact in *While Canada Slept*. This issue was also the focus of Norman Hillmer and Maureen Appel Molot, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2002: A Fading Power* (Oxford: Toronto, 2002).

more than just defending Canada's interests. It's also about demonstrating an international leadership role for our country."<sup>45</sup> A couple of weeks later, the Harper government pledged in its first throne speech to "a more robust diplomatic role for Canada, a stronger military and a more effective use of Canadian dollars."<sup>46</sup> This type of rhetoric was quite common coming from Canadian governments. The difference is that the Harper government put its money where its mouth was. As was mentioned earlier, the 2006 and 2007 federal budgets increased military spending. On the foreign aid side, the previous Liberal government had made Afghanistan the number one recipient of Canadian foreign aid. Once taking office, the Harper government increased the level of funding. The May 2006 budget brought the total Canadian commitment to \$1.2 billion in the 2001-2011 period. The 2007 budget found an additional \$200 million in new money for reconstruction and development activities.<sup>47</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there was a debate over the precise military role of the Canadian Forces. While there were elements in DFAIT that wanted Canada to play a "traditional" peacekeeping role, the CF wanted "to get into the fight."<sup>48</sup> Eventually, the CF, in combination with the civilians in the DND, got what they wanted when the Chrétien government deployed the 3 PPCLI to Afghanistan in October 2001. That initial deployment did much for the morale of the CF. The Commander of Canadian ground troops in Afghanistan would later brag that Canadian participation in the war "established our credibility in the coalition. Canada had been tainted with an image of being blue-hatted peacekeepers, and I think...the aggressiveness and tenacity that the troops showed...dispelled the myth...we were like a pack of rabid pit bulls in satisfying the coalition's end state."<sup>49</sup> Since then, the CF, especially under Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier, has consistently lobbied for greater combat responsibilities in Afghanistan. Kirton has identified a wing of the Canadian military that had trained with the Americans and wanted "to do some real war fighting."<sup>50</sup> They were led by Hillier who had served as the first Canadian Deputy Commanding General of III Corps, US Army in Fort Hood, Texas from 1998-2000.

There are a number of interrelated explanations for the CF's decision to lobby the government for more war fighting. First, they saw Afghanistan as an opportunity to establish its credentials as a credible fighting force among its NATO peers. Interviews with Canadian soldiers revealed a distinct preference for NATO-led operations as opposed to UN operations. In too many UN operations, Canadians are forced to work with, and compensate for, poorly trained and equipped troops from Jordan, Kenya, or Nepal, but they prefer to work with professionally trained and equipped troops from the United States, Britain, or France.<sup>51</sup> Second, the CF wanted to end the view that the

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Harper, "Address by the Prime Minister to the Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan," (March 13, 2006). Available at <http://www.pm.gc.ca>

<sup>46</sup> Canada, *Canada's New Government: Turning a New Leaf* (Ottawa: Office of the Governor General, 4 April 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Canadian International Development Agency, "Funding: Canada's Commitment to Afghanistan," accessed online at <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca> on April 30, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Sean M. Maloney, *Enduring the Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan* (Potomac Books: Washington, 2005), 57-58.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Roach, *September 11: The Consequences for Canada*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Kirton, "Harper's 'Made in Canada' Global Leadership," 51.

<sup>51</sup> Interviews with Canadian troops, Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2004.

military was to be used for everything but fighting wars. Prior to Afghanistan, the CF was deployed for UN peacekeeping operations and humanitarian relief operations. It was also used domestically to support civilian authorities in firefighting, snow removal, and flood relief. These are all worthwhile missions, but many members of the Canadian military believe that they are ancillary to their primary function of war fighting. Finally, the Afghanistan mission was to be a corrective to an army that was, in the words of Lieutenant-General Leslie, Chief of the Land Staff, “completely and utterly risk averse. We have been consumed by bureaucratic efficiency, and become fixated on process and planning.”<sup>52</sup> This internal lobby, combined with Harper’s own gut instincts, provides a powerful explanation not necessarily for Canada’s participation in Afghanistan, but the *militarization* of the mission.

A final motivating factor for Harper’s interest in Afghanistan is as a partisan wedge issue to demonstrate his leadership abilities to the Canadian public and to divide the Liberal party. Harper wanted to portray himself as a decisive leader, in contrast to the dithering of Paul Martin, and Afghanistan was an excellent opportunity to show leadership. Parliament was used for a significant take note debate on Afghanistan in March 2006 and again in May 2006 when the House voted to extend the mission until 2009. At the time of these Parliamentary maneuvers, the Liberals were undergoing a leadership race. Afghanistan was a source of division between the leadership contenders with the frontrunner Michael Ignatieff in strong support of the mission, but everybody else, including the eventual winner Stephane Dion, was in various degrees of opposition. There were also some senior Liberals in the House, who had been part of the decision-making process under the Chrétien and Martin governments, like Interim Leader Bill Graham, were also in support of the operation. Harper hoped to use the debate/vote on Afghanistan to highlight the divisions and contradictions within the Liberal Party and to show Canadians that the Conservatives were the best choice on issues of international peace and security.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the operation in Afghanistan has become Mr. Harper’s war. In part this was due to timing. Harper took over as prime minister at the same moment that Canada was taking on much more demanding tasks that would involve greater combat responsibilities. When ISAF launched Operation Medusa, its spring 2006 offensive against Taliban forces, Canadians naturally associated the fighting with the government of the day. However, Harper, through his rhetoric and his actions, made sure that there was no mistake; ownership of the mission was with him. He wanted Canadians to hold him responsible. This leads to the second part of the paper. What was Harper’s motivation, in the absence of any prior international experience, to make the war in Afghanistan the centre-piece of not only his foreign policy, but the centre-piece of his entire government? In assessing the motivations, there is a need to examine Harper’s core values and beliefs. Harper is an ideological conservative, and therefore has two fundamental beliefs with regards to foreign policy: good bilateral relations with the United States and a strong military. The war in Afghanistan brought these two fundamental beliefs together. What also came together in Afghanistan was the desire of

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Granatstein, *Whose War is it?*, 217.

General Hillier and other senior officers to change the culture of the Canadian military. Both within the CF, but also in how Canadian politicians, the Canadian public, and allied countries perceived the CF. This institutional interest meshed very well with Harper's belief system. The result was an escalation of the military role within the Afghanistan operation.

The theoretical objective of this paper was to highlight the shift in emphasis from low politics to high politics within Canada's foreign policy. This is not to suggest that there are no low politics priorities within the Harper government's agenda. Potential trade pacts are being pursued with South Korea and India. Environmental policies are being pursued through the Conservative's green plan which has acknowledged the problem of climate change even if it fails to recognize Kyoto emission targets. Human rights remain a key topic within China-Canada relations. All of that being said, the most important issue in Canadian foreign policy is a high politics one; the war in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the issue that has engaged the prime minister and his most senior cabinet ministers (McKay, O'Connor, Day). In addition, while Ottawa is trying to pursue a 3D approach, it is clear that defence has dominated the mission at the expense of development and diplomacy. This is not to criticize the approach, but to show that Ottawa's primary focus is the high politics aspect of its deployment; the security situation on the ground.