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## NATO's Terror Plan Unravels as Canada Threatens Afghan Pullout

By Janine Zacharia



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Dec. 18 (Bloomberg) -- On a blanket of fresh snow along the bank of the Ottawa River, 1,000 soldiers from the Royal Canadian Regiment and other units practiced this month for eventual combat in southern Afghanistan.

The troops are destined next year for Kandahar province, where Canada has been doing most of the fighting for NATO against the resurgent Taliban militia. That may not last. With most Canadians now opposed to staying in the war, Canada is weighing whether to pull out its 2,500 troops in 2009, which would deal a major blow to the fragile coalition's efforts.

The struggle to keep countries like Canada committed in Afghanistan illustrates the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's broader problem of transforming itself from a Cold War alliance into one focused on the war on

terrorism.

"The Afghanistan mission has exposed real limitation in the way the alliance is organized, operated and equipped," U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Dec. 11 before a conference in Edinburgh aimed at winning more NATO support for the war.

This is "due to the way various allies view the very nature of the alliance in the 21st century," he said. "We're in a post-Cold War environment. We have to be ready to operate in distant locations against insurgencies and terrorist networks."

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has set up an advisory panel that will offer its recommendations by Jan. 31. The possibility of a pullout troubles those who have been in the fight.

### Fallen Comrades

Standing beside the Wall of Fallen Comrades at the training base in Petawawa, a two-hour drive from Ottawa, the capital, Captain Steve Brown runs his finger over photos of soldiers killed by Taliban mortar shells and U.S. friendly fire in Kandahar.

"Canada went in for all the right reasons," he says. "If we don't carry through with what we set out to achieve, it would be a personal disappointment."

NATO faces waning public support in many of the 39 nations that contribute to the International Security Assistance Force, just as violence escalates. United Nations envoy Tom Koenigs said in October that suicide attacks increased 50 percent this year through September, compared with a year ago. Roadside bombings jumped about 30 percent.

### Restrictions

Only about half the 41,000 ISAF troops are allowed to engage in combat, according to estimates from analysts including Christine Fair, who served with the UN in Afghanistan.

American, British, Canadian and Dutch soldiers do the bulk of the fighting. Troops from France, Germany and other countries are confined by rules set back home to less-violent areas and have limits on engaging in military operations.

Under these circumstances, finding a replacement for Canada "would be a significant challenge," says Eugene Lang, a former chief of staff to two Canadian defense ministers.

During congressional testimony last week in Washington, Gates chastised allies for not providing more troops,

trainers and helicopters and for failing to sell the war to skeptical citizens. He also offered praise.

``Some of our allies have more than stepped up to the plate," Gates said. ``The British, the Canadians, the Australians and several others have played a really significant and powerful role in Afghanistan."

#### Blank Check

Canadian lawmakers have given the military a blank check for Afghanistan, where the Canadian army -- whose battle history includes World War II D-Day landings at Normandy -- is waging its most intense combat since the Korean War.

Canadians aren't as accustomed as Americans or Britons to ``seeing grinding combat missions," and war casualties have polarized the electorate, says Lang, co-author of ``The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar," a national bestseller.

Seventy-three Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have been killed in Afghanistan, a toll proportionally as high as American casualties relative to the size of the two countries' forces.

``Canadians see their military as a peacekeeping force, not a military force," Lang says.

Two-thirds of respondents in a September poll by Angus Reid Strategies said they don't want to extend Canada's mission past February 2009, the date its mandate expires.

#### `More Exposed'

People ``have been reacting negatively to the fact that Canadians are more exposed" than other soldiers, says Pierre Martin, a political science professor at the University of Montreal in Quebec, where anti-war sentiment outpaces the rest of the country.

Newspaper editorials have faulted Canadian Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier for not finding others to share the burden. He made a pitch to NATO foreign ministers in Brussels Dec. 7, though no new troop commitments emerged. The Harper government is ``failing at negotiating some sort of rotation with other allies," Martin says.

At the Edinburgh meeting, Canadian Defense Minister Peter Mackay said he had held ``very fruitful" discussions about ways to get more countries involved in southern Afghanistan.

Canada's future role in the conflict should be clarified in February, when Harper says he will inform NATO of the country's intentions. Much will depend on the recommendations of the five-member panel headed by former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley. Options besides a pullout include expanding training of the Afghan army and police and shifting solely to rebuilding efforts.

``From now until February 2009, we have our mandate and our orders," Lieutenant General Andrew Leslie, commander of Canada's army, said in an interview on Dec. 5. ``After that, I don't have a clue."

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