

## New Afghan motion sets 2011 as mission end date

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The Conservative minority government unveiled a new motion Thursday on extending the mission in Afghanistan in a bid to close a compromise deal with the opposition Liberals that would allow Canadian soldiers to stay another two years.

The new motion sets out July 2011 as the end date for the mission in Kandahar, with all troops out of the region by December. The Liberals had asked for the mission to end in February, with a pullout in July.

The motion also adopts Liberal language in terms of the mission being about training and providing security for reconstruction.

The motion refers to the need for 1,000 more troops from NATO allies, a key recommendation of the Manley report, although the Liberals had asked for a "sufficient" number and contested whether or not 1,000 would be enough.



Stephen Harper delivers a speech during the Conference of Defence Associations annual general meeting in Ottawa on Thursday. (*Chris Wattie/Reuters*)

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The motion does not adopt the Liberal language on detainees, which would require continued suspension of transfers. Instead it commits to "meeting the highest NATO and international standards."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper outlined the new proposal in a speech Thursday to the Conference of Defence Associations in Ottawa. The government has set two days for debate on Afghanistan starting Monday, and the motion must be issued by Thursday.

"It seems obvious that we have arrived at a consensus that can be submitted to Parliament for ratification," Mr. Harper said.

"We're pleased that the Liberal party recognizes that we should prolong the mission until 2011 and that we should leave operational decisions up to our military commanders who are on site in Afghanistan."

Mr. Harper also told the conference his government will raise the "automatic" annual increases in the defence budget from 1.5 per cent to 2 per

cent, starting in the 2011-12 fiscal year, to "thoroughly reverse the so-called rusting-out of the Canadian Forces."

A vote on Afghanistan is not expected until next month – although it would be delayed if the government is defeated on the budget to be tabled next week.

Canada's continued presence in the dangerous mission in southern Afghanistan will turn on a parliamentary vote.

The Liberals, the only opposition party not demanding the mission end completely next year, have called for a change in the mission away from combat and toward security and training.

Setting a clear end date in 2011 is key to winning Liberal support for extending the mission past February, 2009 – and Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion had accused Mr. Harper of being unwilling to commit to such a firm exit date.

"I don't think it's a deal-breaker," a spokesperson for Mr. Dion said Thursday of the six-month difference.

"We're quite pleased that they've come quite a ways toward adopting what we've proposed."

Mr. Dion wants to analyze Harper's new motion in detail before deciding whether Liberals will support it. But the initial warm response from his office suggests a deal is virtually certain.

Liberal defence critic Denis Coderre cautiously welcomed the government's new motion.

"There's progress that there's an end date," he said. "It seems that if they're taking our own wording it sends a clear message that we've been doing our homework and now there's room."

The government presented its first motion on extending the Afghan mission less than two weeks ago, in which it called for a review of the mission in 2011 – a phrase that some said could lead to further extension, rather than bringing the troops home.

They said the motion could be a matter of confidence when it is voted on next month, which could trigger an election.

However, Mr. Dion, seeking to keep his caucus of MPs united and avoid fighting an election campaign on the Afghan war, offered a compromise that would see an extended mission given a new mandate after 2009 – but he conceded that the generals, not politicians, would decide what fighting is necessary.

The Liberals have also demanded a series of other concessions, including regular parliamentary reports on the progress of the mission, a NATO agreement on the treatment of prisoners, and a broadening of aid and reconstruction efforts.

The Conservatives have said that they will only extend the mission if NATO provides 1,000 troops as reinforcements, and help in obtaining helicopters and aerial drones, as recommended by a panel headed by former Liberal minister John Manley.

But the Liberals say more troops might be needed – as replacements in the heavy combat role, rather than reinforcements.

*With reports from Brian Laghi and Canadian Press*

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