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# Afghanistan Panel Recommends Re-Orienting Canada's Mission but Staying the Course

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## **Afghanistan Panel Recommends Re-Orienting Canada's Mission but Staying the Course**

Erika Simpson

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The blue-ribbon panel led by former Liberal Cabinet minister John Manley and charged by Prime Minister Stephen Harper with recommending Canada's way forward in Afghanistan has concluded that the current mission must be extended as long as two conditions are met.

The conditions are that a battle group of 1,000 soldiers be deployed to Kandahar from another NATO country, and new medium-lift helicopters and high performance unmanned aerial vehicles must be obtained for Canadian troops.

These are easily attainable goals.

First, it's presumed that the Canadian government will purchase the new equipment.

Secondly, the 26-member alliance of NATO currently has 11,700 soldiers in a region where Canada has 2,700 forces deployed (and has endured 77 deaths).

While the European allies within NATO seem reluctant to contribute more soldiers, defence officials from alliance countries are adding pressure to the appeal by Canada's Minister of National Defence Peter MacKay to share the burden.

For instance, General Klaus Naumann, Germany's former top soldier and ex-chairman of NATO's military committee, recently delivered a blistering attack on his own country's performance in Afghanistan.

"The time has come for Germany to decide if it wants to be a reliable partner," he said, adding that by insisting on "special rules" for its forces in Afghanistan, the government of Angela Merkel in Berlin was contributing to "the dissolution of NATO."

We can expect an announcement of a few thousand more troops at the big NATO summit in April, and if that is not sufficient, the recent announcement by the U.S. that it will send 3,200 Marines into the south of Afghanistan should suffice to fulfil the panel's second strong recommendation.

Along with Canada, the British and the Dutch already contribute mainly "counterinsurgency" forces.

Despite U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' off-the-cuff comments last week that NATO forces "don't know how to do counterinsurgency operations," a chastened Gates is

now fervently praising Canadian, British, and Dutch soldiers for their "valour and skill in combat."

In the final analysis, it will probably be the Canadian Forces' personnel currently deployed in Afghanistan that decide if they actually want to take on a more "peaceful" role.

Counterinsurgency, ground infantry operations, and armed patrolling are more dangerous tasks—it will always be difficult to avoid casualties—but, unfortunately, Canadian soldiers seem to prefer these exciting sorts of tasks compared to the more mundane responsibilities of peacebuilding.

At the same time, while the majority of serving officers and reservists seem to prefer peace enforcement to peacebuilding, public opinion in many NATO member states (including Canada) increasingly favours a reduced military emphasis and presence in Afghanistan, with a strong preference for more civilian involvement.

In the collision of these different trends and preoccupations against each other, the only sure guarantee is that the debate about Canada's future in Afghanistan is nowhere near over.

Dr. Erika Simpson is the author of *NATO and the Bomb* and co-authored the original reports to establish the Lester B. Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre in Nova Scotia. She is the vice-chair of the Canadian Pugwash Group, the national affiliate of the International Pugwash conferences on World Affairs and an associate professor of international relations in the department of political science at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada. She can be reached at [simpson@uwo.ca](mailto:simpson@uwo.ca)