

I would like to thank and congratulate the Research Group in International Security and the Centre d'études et de recherches internationales of the Université de Montréal for organizing this symposium on Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

Your discussions over the next two days will surely help develop an understanding of the situation in Afghanistan and the role our country is playing there.

In terms of foreign policy, this mission is one of Canada's most important commitments in many years.

And this is why it is crucial to recall the fundamental reasons for our presence in that country.

Arriving here today, I saw demonstrators.

I understand that a protest against the commitment we actually fulfill in Afghanistan has been organized for the opening of this conference.

In our democracy, demonstrators have the right to express their opinion.

Canada, as part of a UN mandate, is in Afghanistan to ensure that this type of freedom is also enjoyed there.

In December 2001, after the fall of the Taliban regime that was protecting al Qaeda terrorists, the United Nations authorized the implementation of an international force to help the new provisional Afghan government maintain security.

This resolution binds all UN member states under international law.

Along with its allies, Canada committed to supporting the Afghan government's efforts to rebuild their economy, democracy and viable state so that Afghans themselves could be in charge of their country and their development.

It was against this backdrop that the London Conference was held in early 2006, bringing together the Afghan government and the international community.

It was there that the Afghanistan Compact was adopted, establishing a framework for cooperation between the Afghan government, the UN and the international community.

It sets out a number of clear objectives for rebuilding the country up to 2011.

More than 60 countries and international organizations are taking part.

Canada currently has troops in Afghanistan because it made a commitment to the international community.

We are there under a UN mandate.