

Executive Summary

Canada's involvement in Afghanistan exhibits many of the hallmarks of a "hot button" issue, one which is potentially explosive and for which public reaction is heavily influenced by events and media coverage. Participants to the focus groups spoke with passion and vigour about the issue. This is an issue on which there are very strong opinions, even if based on misperceptions or incomplete information. The issue is also a volatile one and exhibits the potential to become a lightning rod, galvanizing public opinion and perceptions of the overall performance of the Government of Canada and outweighing public concerns on virtually every other front.

There are a number of reasons why this issue strikes a very sensitive chord in the Canadian psyche, not the least of which has been mounting Canadian casualties over the last 12 months. Beyond this obviously tragic reality, it is also apparent that the public perspective on the Canadian Forces and their role does not appear to have evolved much beyond a sort of "Pearsonian" perception of the CF in a very traditional peacekeeping capacity. Thus, the principal factors fundamentally influencing public opinion on this issue are as follows:

There is a sense from comments made by participants that Canadians see themselves as being relatively isolated from the shifting global realities with respect to terrorist activities and civil strife around the world. It is a fact that the U.S., Europe and Asia have been the primary targets of terrorist threats. In general, participants did not see themselves as a principal target of terrorist activity. Therefore, most don't buy the rationale that fighting terrorism abroad will enhance security at home.

The issue is also mired in participants' desire to continue to be seen as international brokers and keepers of peace. The degree to which this coveted role is seen to be damaged or diminished by Canada's involvement in Afghanistan has repercussions for Canadians' support of the mission;

The Canadian public has not been pre-conditioned with respect to the evolving role of the military within this new global context whereby failed states and the activities of non-state actors have replaced conflict between nations as the pre-eminent threats to global security. The fact that these changing circumstances require a different type of military engagement along with diplomatic and humanitarian intervention to support the rebuilding of democratic institutions is not something that Canadians appear to have fully taken on board. Canada's role within NATO during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina represented a decisive shift for the military. Yet, many Canadians were, and likely remain, unaware both of the full nature and extent of that engagement and of its significance in ushering in a new era for the Canadian Forces. The events that took place at the Medak Pocket in Croatia during the mid-1990s, although relatively unknown to many Canadians, marked a turning point for Canadian peacekeepers. The following excerpt from a paper posted on the web site of the Canadian Defence Association describes the Canadian Forces