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Executive Summary

Public Perceptions of Canada's Role in Afghanistan

Prepared for

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada

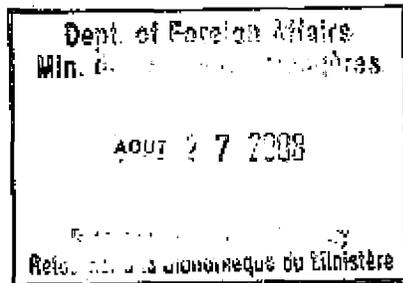
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K0A 0G2

www.international.gc.ca

kevin.chappell@international.gc.ca

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Prepared by :



The Strategic Counsel

Dept. of Foreign Affairs
Min. des Affaires étrangères

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The Strategic Counsel is pleased to present this detailed analysis of findings from a series of focus groups with Canadians regarding their views on the mission in Afghanistan, their level of understanding of the goals of the mission and response to various statements, both supportive and opposed, and facts about the mission.

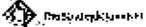
Canada's engagement in Afghanistan, under the auspices of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), was sanctioned by the United Nations in response to the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City by al-Qaeda terrorists on September 11, 2001. The nature of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan has evolved since 2002 when Canadians were first stationed there, in response to the economic and security needs of the Afghan people. Canadians are most aware of Canada's troop deployment to Afghanistan which garners a high media profile. In addition to working toward stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan and improving security for Afghan citizens, Canadians are also heavily engaged in a rebuilding effort, providing economic and humanitarian assistance as well as support in re-establishing basic civic and governance structures and systems. These diplomatic and development initiatives are generally less well known and understood by the Canadian public but are equally important components of the international reconstruction and rebuilding effort.

Over the past 12 months public support for the mission in Afghanistan has fluctuated, reflecting Canadians' growing concerns over the continuing risky nature of the engagement as well as lingering questions, and certainly some misperceptions, about the rationale for Canada's initial involvement. Support for the mission is also linked to the extent to which Canadians believe a positive and sustainable outcome in Afghanistan is likely.

Opinion polls conducted by *The Strategic Counsel* and released publicly have shown support for the decision to send troops to Afghanistan ranging from a high of 55 per cent in March 2006 to a low of 37 per cent in August. Support rebounded to 44 per cent in October 2006, then dropped back to 35 per cent in early December. While there is some debate regarding the extent to which mounting casualties have affected Canadians' views on merits of the Afghan mission, the decline in support appears to track a wavering belief that the deaths of some Canadian soldiers is an acceptable and the expected cost associated with bringing stability and peace to Afghanistan. Over the same time period, March to October 2006, the percentage of Canadians who believe that this price is too high has jumped from 39 per cent to 55 per cent.

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Do Canadians Support or Oppose Sending Troops To Afghanistan?

	Canada										Region																								
	Quebec					Rest of Canada ¹					Ontario					West																			
	Strongly support	Support	Oppose	Strongly oppose	DK/NA/Ref.	Strongly support	Support	Oppose	Strongly oppose	DK/NA/Ref.	Strongly support	Support	Oppose	Strongly oppose	DK/NA/Ref.	Strongly support	Support	Oppose	Strongly oppose	DK/NA/Ref.															
Total Support	55	40	48	39	37	42	44	43	27	39	24	21	27	30	59	44	51	44	42	47	49	58	42	48	39	42	46	46	61	40	56	50	42	49	53
Strongly support	11	6	11	6	6	11	10	3	1	5	-	4	3	4	14	8	13	11	6	13	19	15	9	13	9	7	11	9	12	9	17	12	16	14	18
Support	44	34	37	31	31	32	34	40	26	34	24	21	23	26	45	36	38	33	36	35	43	34	35	30	35	35	30	49	31	39	38	33	35	40	
Oppose	25	31	28	31	31	26	28	32	59	33	35	41	53	29	24	26	23	29	29	24	25	22	30	23	31	39	27	23	25	25	21	28	29	31	26
Strongly oppose	15	23	18	25	24	20	27	21	34	23	35	34	34	39	13	20	18	22	20	20	23	16	20	18	23	19	18	25	10	20	14	19	21	21	18
Total Oppose	41	54	46	55	49	46	55	53	70	56	71	75	67	60	37	40	39	51	49	44	48	38	50	41	54	49	44	51	35	45	35	47	50	47	44
DK/NA/Ref.	4	8	8	8	8	8	8	1	3	4	6	4	8	3	4	7	8	5	9	9	3	4	8	10	7	9	10	3	4	8	10	3	5	9	3

Note: Total of 1,000 respondents in each of the four regions.

Q. Council do you strongly support, support, oppose or strongly oppose the decision to send Canadian troops to Afghanistan?

Base: Total sample

Source: HAMILTON AND COMPANY

At the same time, Canadians are split on whether it was the right or wrong decision to send troops to Afghanistan. Just under half of Canadians (48%) subscribe to each of these opposing points of view. Furthermore, while in October 52 per cent of the public say that Canadian troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan, just over four-in-ten (42%) would not support a withdrawal of troops at this time.

Clearly, Canada's involvement in Afghanistan has been and will continue to be a contentious issue. While Canadians are generally supportive of the Canadian military and support the Canadian soldiers now stationed in Afghanistan, they are less inclined to lend their full and unconditional support to the Canadian engagement as a whole. The purpose of the qualitative

research program was thus to ascertain current levels of understanding and beliefs about the mission, factors and issues driving support and/or opposition to the mission as well as reaction to facts and information both about Afghanistan and the broader international presence in the region. The findings from focus groups provide valuable insights for Government of Canada policy makers and communicators with respect to understanding the extent and nature of critical information gaps as well as the key pressure points for public opinion on this issue.

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A series of 14 focus groups were undertaken, two in each of seven centers across Canada, including Toronto, Oshawa, Laval, Halifax, Drummondville, Vancouver and Saskatoon. All groups were undertaken between November 14th and November 20th, 2006. One group in each center comprised participants who were between the ages of 18 and 35 years, the second comprised those aged 36 years and older. Apart from the age segmentation, participants were recruited to reflect a mix of educational attainment, household income levels and occupations. To the extent possible, groups comprised a 50/50 split of men and women. Representatives of the Canadian Armed Forces were specifically excluded from participation in the focus groups.

Readers of this report should note that the findings from qualitative research are directional in nature. As they do not represent the views of a statistically significant portion of the Canadian population, the findings cannot be said to be representative of the broader population or of the populations of those centers in which the groups were conducted. However, the findings do yield significant insight with regard to the issues and considerations that underpin public views on Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. In this respect, the findings are particularly illuminating and offer guidance to policy makers and communicators alike on the ebb and flow of public opinion on this issue.

A. Summary of Findings

The issue of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan represents a volatile public opinion pressure point and a key point of vulnerability for the Government of Canada.

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is increasingly a point of concern and anxiety for many. Participants' comments suggested the state of the mission, perceptions of its likely success or failure and the continuing risks to Canadian soldiers are a grave preoccupation. This heightened concern represents a fundamental shift in the broader public agenda. Rarely, and certainly not in recent memory, has Canadian foreign affairs or international policy occupied a place of prominence among those national issues or challenges identified as key top-of-mind concerns. Such preoccupations have for the better part of the last decade or more typically focused on health care, education, the economy/jobs or the environment. And, while most national polls now still show health care and the environment among the top concerns of most Canadians, as recently as July 2006, *The Strategic Counsel* noted just under one-in-ten Canadians (7%) identifying terrorism and issues related to Afghanistan as the most important issue facing Canada.

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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

role at the Medak Pocket as follows: "The Canadians, well schooled in the delicate art of peacekeeping, discovered that their negotiation skills were not immediately required there. Instead they found themselves back in their primary war-fighting rôle when Croatian Army units opened fire with machine-guns, mortars and artillery in an effort to stop the Canadian advance. To

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complete their assigned mission the Patricia's were required to threaten the use of, and ultimately use deadly force against the Croatian Army. However, the true test of military professionalism and discipline came after the smoke cleared, the Croats backed down and the Canadians immediately reverted back to their role as impartial peacekeepers in their dealings with individuals that minutes before had attempted to kill them,"¹ and,

Finally, this issue also touches a chord with respect to Canadians' sense of sovereignty and independence, particularly vis a vis the United States. The extent to which Canada's involvement in Afghanistan is linked to defending American interests, or fighting an American war, has a significant impact on whether this is viewed as a "just" and rationale pursuit.

Views on the mission can be divided into three distinct groups – those opposed, those whose views waver between support and opposition (e.g. in the "grey zone"), and those who are generally supportive of Canada's involvement. While opposition is quite firm and generally immovable, support for the mission tends to be soft and more volatile.

The key features and characteristics of each of these public opinion segments are summarized in the tables below.

Those Strongly Opposed to the Mission

¹ <http://www.cda-cda.ca/library/medakpocket.htm>

Defining characteristics

- These are the individuals who firmly believe that diplomacy is far more effective in virtually all conflict situations.
- They are activists to the extent that they attend peace rallies and support groups advocating diplomacy and peaceful resolutions.
- In this respect, their opposition is ideologically based.
- Many of them are in the younger age cohort although we did note exceptions in Saskatoon, for example, where the younger group were all supportive of the mission.
- Notably, among younger participants the real concern about the mission was focused on the military component. There was a sense among this group that Canada should and could undertake development work and offer humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, but that Canada is a nation of peacekeepers and should not engage in conflict zones which shift our involvement outside this realm.
- In addition to youth, this segment comprises the vast majority of those that participated in the Quebec-based focus groups. Participants to these groups were also generally fairly strongly and widely opposed to the mission.
- Many also lack a solid understanding of the background to this issue.
- They are poorly informed and do not exhibit a strong interest in investing time and effort to enhance their knowledge

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Beliefs and concerns about the mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundamentally, they believe that Canada should not be engaged in any conflict that puts Canadians' lives at risk. • They are generally opposed to investing in a build-up of defence machinery and view it as a misuse of public monies. • Within this group there is also a segment which is principally concerned about the dollars being spent on the military and believe that this money could be better spent tackling domestic issues and challenges. They feel that Afghanistan is diverting attention from important domestic issues at home. • They believe that this is an American war and not a "just" cause for Canadians. • This group also feels that the situation in Afghanistan is a "hopeless cause," that it would take years to establish stability and that there is a strong likelihood the country will revert back into chaos upon the withdrawal of Canadians and other forces. They point to the opium-based economy and religious divisions as the real issues.
Commonly asked questions/commonly used phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You're never going to change those people." • "They want to live like that." • "They don't want our help."
Potential communications approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This group is not necessarily the primary target of communications activity as virtually no amount of information is likely to impact their views. • Perhaps the best that could be hoped for is that some benefit will be derived through provision of more facts and information. • In particular, this group may be somewhat influenced by reinforcing an understanding of the role of aid workers on-the-ground in Afghanistan as well as the support provided by the Canadian military to aid workers. • While views will not likely shift dramatically, a better understanding may serve to enhance their appreciation of the role played by the military in Afghanistan.

"Soft" Supporters of the Mission	
Defining characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This group doesn't hesitate to say they support Canada being in Afghanistan, but they do nevertheless struggle to articulate a solid and convincing rationale for this point of view. • They tend to exhibit a sense of the bigger picture (e.g. need to stabilize the region in order to make infrastructure and other improvements). • Usually they express a higher level of knowledge about the history of Afghanistan which has led up to this point.
Beliefs and concerns about the mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They feel strongly that it would be detrimental to the Afghan people and to Canada to withdraw at this time. • Their key concern centers on a perception that there is no plan, there are no markers laid out for success, and no accountability for the funds that are being spent to support Canada's involvement.

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<p>Commonly asked questions/commonly used phrases</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Canadians don't have a right to talk about human rights if we're not willing to do what's necessary to uphold this value." • "What's the end game?" • "How will we know if we've been successful?"
<p>Potential communications approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While this group is supportive, they would benefit immensely from information about the mission and its objectives. This would serve to reinforce and solidify their support. • An aggressive information campaign about Canada's role in Afghanistan, including a reference to timelines for the engagement, would bolster their sense of confidence in the mission. • There is also a desire for regular progress reports. This would address both the need for ongoing information updates as well as their sense that accountability should be built into the communications on this issue.

The Uncertain: Those Wavering Between Support and Opposition ("In the Grey Zone")

<p>Defining characteristics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This group spans those who may be somewhat opposed as well as those somewhat supportive, but they are concerned and unclear on exactly why Canadians are in Afghanistan, what they are doing, and what we can expect to accomplish. • This is a key group. They have very little knowledge and understanding about the mission. Headlines are shaping their views in a negative way.
<p>Beliefs and concerns about the mission</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have some grasp of the benefits to the Afghan people such as reinstating human rights, especially for women and children, but no clear sense of what the benefit is to Canadians at home. • Some also question whether Canada is imposing its western values on a nation which isn't ready or willing to accept a western way of life. • At the same time, they are uncertain as to whether any successful resolution in Afghanistan is sustainable. • They question whether the Canadian Forces have been properly trained and equipped for this type of mission. • They express some doubts about the capability of the Canadian Forces. These perceptions are based on an understanding that budgets for equipment have declined in recent years and media reports about the generally poor condition and morale of the military.
<p>Commonly asked questions/commonly used phrases</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Why Afghanistan? Why are we in Afghanistan and not in other troubled parts of the world?" • "Our forces aren't prepared for or adequately equipped to successfully accomplish their mission." • "Why is Canada doing the lion's share of the hard work in Afghanistan?" • "Why are Canadian troops in the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan? Why are other countries not participating?"

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Potential communications approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The “information vacuum” has only served to reinforce their existing fears and concerns.• Their views can be shifted slightly more positively with information about:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Concrete examples of progress (focusing on women and children)• UN and NATO involvement• Clarity around the need for security and stability in order to provide aid and undertake diplomacy (they do generally buy into this premise)
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In general, younger Canadians (aged 18 to 35), with some exceptions (e.g. Saskatoon), tend to be less supportive of the mission compared to older Canadians, aged 36 and up. This appears to be linked to a less informed perspective on world events in general and Afghanistan in particular, as well as a stronger anti-American stance, compared to those in the older age cohort.

Generally speaking, with the exception as noted above, younger focus group participants tended to be more strongly opposed to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. This generational effect is a result of a number of factors, including:

Stronger opposition to U.S. international policies and a sense that Canada is simply following suit – Many young people were strongly opposed to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan because it suggests an alignment with U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, there is a belief expressed by some young people that the Afghanistan mission is an American-led initiative. As such, they are concerned that Canadians are not in control. This sense that Canadians are blindly following U.S. leadership in the region is a worry to the extent that Canada is seen to become more vulnerable as a terrorist target. They are concerned that terrorist groups will make little distinction between Canada and the United States.

A concern that Canadian Forces don't really know what they're doing or what enemy they are fighting in Afghanistan – This attitude is based on three distinct but mutually reinforcing perceptions about the Canadian mission and about Afghanistan in general. This first is a lack of confidence in the political leadership in general. On many issues, young people express doubts about the wisdom and judgement of government officials. This is reflective of the broader issue of a lack of confidence in traditional institutions and authoritarian bodies which plays out in their perceptions regarding Canada's role in Afghanistan. The second is a general tendency to view the military as an increasingly outdated institution. In many respects this attitude is simply reflective of the idealism of youth and the desire for a world in which military intervention becomes unnecessary. Finally, it is clear from comments made by many young people in focus groups that they lack a full understanding of the geography, history, culture and politics of Afghanistan. Their views are shaped by limited information and understanding which leads them to a very simplistic (and generally negative) view of the situation.

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A disconnect between the notions of protecting Canadians and helping the Afghan people – While this is a view held by many participants regardless of their age, it is particularly pronounced among younger focus group participants.

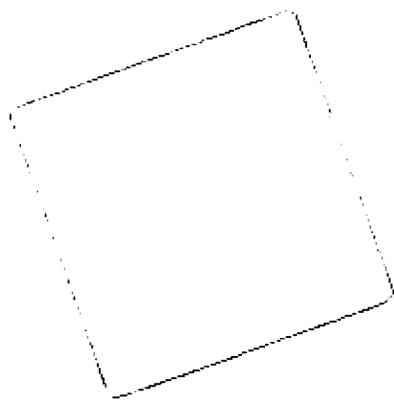
Notably, young people in the focus groups were supportive of humanitarian and reconstruction/rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. However, they firmly believe that these efforts could be undertaken in the absence of a military presence. The notion that the region must be secured and stabilized in order for rebuilding efforts to be successful is not a premise that many young people accept. By contrast, they argue that the military is likely exacerbating an already tenuous situation and a destabilizing factor.

Those opposed and even those supportive of the mission express scepticism about the likelihood of a positive outcome. Their views have been shaped by media reports on the almost daily skirmishes between Canadian Forces and Afghan insurgents. They have little sense of a broader plan and question the commitment of the Afghan people and leadership, based on the region's troubled history.

Among those opposed (and even those who are supportive), the principle issues/concerns are:

Canadians are fighting an American war. Continued use of terms such as the “War on Terror” in describing Canada’s efforts in Afghanistan has had the effect of co-mingling the situation in Iraq with Afghanistan in the minds of many participants. It is difficult for many to de-link Afghanistan from Iraq. As such, given that the “weapons of mass destruction” argument originally employed as the principal rationale for the U.S. going into Iraq has subsequently been revealed as baseless, many believe that the rationale for going into Afghanistan is likely faulty or weak at best. Moreover, the deteriorating conditions in Iraq, which is seeing increasing sectarian violence and terrorist activity, are effectively leading many to believe that this must also be the case in Afghanistan.

There is no real reason for Canada to be fighting in Afghanistan. Among the younger participants in particular, many felt that Canada was forced or manipulated into participating in Afghanistan by the Americans following 9/11. There is also some suspicion that Canada is in Afghanistan simply to provide support to the United States and Britain and that these countries are operating purely out of self-interest in an attempt to dominate the region. Related to this is the fact that many are of the view the U.S. may be imminently pulling out of Afghanistan. This view has been reinforced by the result of the mid-term elections in the United States. Talk of bringing troops home, although it has been in reference to the American engagement in Iraq, is leading some to believe that Americans may also withdraw from Afghanistan, leaving Canadian troops increasingly vulnerable. There is little understanding that Canada is part of a larger international contingent.



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There is no clear plan. By this participants mean that they are not aware of a roadmap setting out specific goals or desired outcomes for being in Afghanistan. They have not heard of or seen any discussion as to what would constitute a successful outcome or what would be the markers for success in Afghanistan. This leaves participants feeling very pessimistic and participants then tend to liken Afghanistan to the Americans' experience in Iraq – "I don't see the clear plan ... it's the same as the U.S. in Iraq;"

Their sense is that little to no progress has been made to date. Notably, illuminating participants on the fact that Canada has been involved in Afghanistan for about five years tends to have the affect of heightening any concern that little progress has been made during this period of time. Many participants in fact question whether the Afghan people are better off now than they were five years ago. If this is the case, there seems to be little evidence that has been made public to support it. In addition, there is some expression of futility over the mission. There is a sense that once the international forces leave, the country will revert back to historical patterns of conflict;

There is a worry that the Canadian troops are not well enough equipped. This is reinforced by a view that Canadians are peacekeepers, not fighters. As peacekeepers, participants believe that Canada lacks the expertise to fight insurgent Taliban forces or search out terrorist enclaves in the mountainous areas of Afghanistan. This worry seems to stem from two preoccupations: first, that the Canadian contingent is too small to have any significant impact and second, that Canadian troops have been neglected over the last decade or more. On this latter point, it is likely that years of public discussion about cuts to the military, out of date or poorly maintained equipment, and low morale among members of the military has left Canadians with a perception that Canadian Forces are ill-prepared to operate effectively in the Afghanistan theatre;

Many are of the view that Canada may be imposing a "way of life" or cultural values on the Afghan people that is neither what they want nor something they have asked for. There is a strong sense that the Canadian mission has been imposed on the Afghan people and that many of the locals, apart from government officials, are resentful of the Canadian presence. Virtually no one is of the view that Canadians are in Afghanistan as a result of a United Nations security resolution and at the request of the Afghanistan government. Indeed some participants referred to the mission as the "invasion of Afghanistan," suggesting that Canadians are taking part in an aggression that contravenes or undermines the sovereignty of Afghanistan;

Participants see no clear benefit for Canada being in Afghanistan. The relevance of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan has not been clearly articulated to Canadians. They also struggle to ascertain whether Canada's involvement reduces or increases the risk of a terrorist attack at home.

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Participants fail to see any connection between Afghanistan and Canadian security. They do not understand how fighting in Afghanistan in any way protects Canadians. While they generally buy into the view that Canada's involvement demonstrates leadership, fulfills our obligation to NATO and an active commitment to the protection of human rights, they do not see Afghanistan as a defence of Canadian national interests. Thus, the engagement is viewed as having very little, if any, direct relevance to most, apart from the obvious altruistic benefit associated with rebuilding a country that had been repressed and regressed under Taliban rule.

In all groups the question of whether Canada's involvement in Afghanistan reduces or enhances the risk of becoming a terrorist target was debated quite vigorously. Participants hold views on both sides of this issue. Some feel that Canada is increasingly a target as a result of its role in Afghanistan. Others believe that Canada would put itself at even greater risk if troops were withdrawn. The bottomline, however, is that few believe this issue to be a key factor in determining whether Canada stays or withdraws. While it is not driving public opinion with respect to support or opposition to the engagement, it is seen as a minor to moderately important risk consideration.

At the same time, few participants endorsed a swift and full withdrawal of Canadian troops at this time or even within the next 12 months.

While those who were most strongly opposed to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan advocated an immediate pull-out, the majority view was that doing so would have disastrous consequences both for Afghanistan and for Canada's reputation within the international community and among its NATO allies. For those who were uncertain or wavering with respect to Canada's involvement, a 12 to 18 month withdrawal timeframe was deemed reasonable. Others advocated maintaining a commitment through to 2009.

B. Key Communications Challenges

The communications challenges facing the Government of Canada on this issue are considerable, multilayered and complex. Opinions on the issue have been developed and have solidified based on a combination of myths, misperceptions and minimal understanding of the situation. Thus the Government's principal challenges are:

Increasing public knowledge and understanding of the plight of the Afghan people, their history and the opportunities through the provision of basic facts about the region;

Busting key myths and misperceptions about the engagement, including current perceptions that:

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- Canadians "invaded" Afghanistan;
- Canadians are acting unilaterally or under the direction of the U.S. forces;
- Canadians are uninvited and unwelcome in Afghanistan;
- Canadians are fighting a rising tide of civilian resentment. They are engaged in combat with Afghan civilians as well as with the insurgency movement; and
- Canadians are aggressors in the current conflict;

Articulating a more tangible benefit for Canadians that connects with Canadians' sense of identity of themselves in the international arena;

Countering an increasing trend toward insularity and an inward-looking focus. This is a particularly worrisome public opinion force particularly in an era which calls for increased global sensitivity and multilateral cooperation as the economic power base shifts in favour of the Sino-Asian continent;

Taking ownership of the issue and demonstrating a sense of responsibility toward the Afghan people to overcome the perception that a war in this "remote" part of the world is "not our issue";

Shifting perceptions of the Canadian military and redefining the role of peacekeepers;

Outlining the full scope of Canada's involvement, establishing and reinforcing the intersection between and importance of diplomacy, development and security activities;

Battling the current overlay of public cynicism which permeates perceptions of many government initiatives and general mistrust of the media. Combined, these phenomena make it extremely difficult to engage an open and receptive public audience; and

Demonstrating tangible progress.

C. The Broad Communications Approach

There is a need to communicate in a balanced fashion, employing a tone that is:

Optimistic – reflective of the progress to date;

Hopeful – underscoring that Canadians will continue to support the desire of the Afghan for an improved quality of life; and

Cautious – honest about the risks involved and the commitment to see the mission through.

Participants tended to question all of the facts and information put in front of them. This reflects the increasingly sceptical public mindset especially with respect to communications from the Government of Canada which they tend to view as painting a very one-sided picture of events. Examples of the successes and the failures as well as an honest assessment of the ongoing

challenges would serve to reduce public cynicism.

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D. A Framework for Communications

The following offers some guidance on a broad framework for communicating Canada's involvement in Afghanistan and addressing the key communications challenges noted above.

1. Framing the Issue: The Context

The issue needs to be appropriately framed for Canadians within the broader context of Canada's overall foreign policy approach. In particular, a context must be established that responds to the following basic questions:

Why Afghanistan? Why not somewhere else?

Does Afghanistan preclude other operations?

Are we redirecting monies that could be better spent addressing domestic issues?

2. Developing Key Messages

Possible key messages should be constructed around the following themes to address misperceptions and information gaps but also to initiate a "morphing" of Canadians' concept of peacekeeping into the modern era:

Canada's NATO obligation/An International Operation

We are there as part of our commitment to the UN and NATO.

We are there with 36 other nations.

Responding to and Supporting the Afghan People

The Afghan people have asked us and want us to be there.

We can make a difference. We are making a difference. We are helping to reinstate human rights for women and children. We are helping to rebuild the basic economic and social structures of society that we in Canada take for granted.

We are fighting the Taliban and terrorists in order to create a safe and peaceful environment for the Afghan people.

Continuing the Tradition of Peacekeeping and Adapting to Changing Realities

Canadians have a strong and well-respected tradition as peacekeepers. We will continue to play that role when and where we can be effective.

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We are rooting out the sources of destabilization in the region (terrorists/the Taliban) that are continuing to strike fear among the Afghan people and preventing them from going about their daily business.

Stability, development and democracy go hand in hand.

Today's Canadian peacekeeper requires a broad set of skills. The concept of peacekeeping has evolved into a more dynamic role involving peace support operations.

Progress is Being Made

We are creating the conditions to allow a democratic society to develop and flourish.

The number of conflict zones in Afghanistan is limited. Much of the country is living peacefully and making progress.

Continued Commitment Is Required

We have made a commitment to the Afghan people. We need to stand by it.

Demonstrating Leadership – Defending Human Rights Where and When They are Threatened

In Afghanistan we are standing beside the Afghan people to defend their rights against those who wish to terrorize and oppress them.

3. Articulating a Clearer Benefit for Canadians

This is a particularly difficult challenge. It is clear that the benefit of "protecting Canadians" carries little weight. A more effective approach may be one that connects with Canadians' sense of altruism, pride in the peacekeeping tradition and desire to be seen as a key player on the international stage.

Demonstrating leadership in the international arena

Living up to our international commitments

Acting on our beliefs – Supporting and reinforcing human rights

4. Employing More Effective Vocabulary

The groups very clearly revealed that certain terms and phrases have the effect of heightening concerns and cynicism about the mission or, alternatively, striking a more positive chord. A brief summary of key terms to avoid and/or to reinforce is shown in the table below:

Executive Summary

Vocabulary/Terms/Phrases/Concepts to Reinforce	Vocabulary/Terms/Phrases/Concepts to Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebuilding • Restoring • Reconstruction • Stability • Security • Reinforcing and supporting basic human rights • Enhancing the lives of women and children • Part of an international effort • Providing peacekeeping and peace support • Hope • Opportunity • A future for the Afghan people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Freedom, democracy, liberty – in combination this phrase comes across as sounding too American • Avoid developing a line of argumentation too strongly based on values. While the value of human rights is strongly supported, there is a risk of appearing to be imposing Canadian values. Again, this is not seen to be the "Canadian way." • Protecting Canadians • Fighting terrorism/the War on Terror • 9/11 – References to September 11th simply tend to reinforce perceptions that this is an American war • Linking Canada's involvement too closely with American actions in the region – again, this serves to reinforce a perception that Canada is becoming too closely aligned with the U.S. with respect to its foreign policy stance and approach

5. The Tactics and Tools: Information Outreach

It is important to utilize a variety of tools and tactics in order to filter communications at various levels, both in brief and in depth. Communications should recognize the multiple ways in which Canadians absorb information via both traditional and new media. An outreach campaign should include:

A dedicated and integrated web strategy;

Use of the regular media, including trusted journalists;

Key speaking opportunities;

On-the-ground reports (from Afghanistan); and

Regular progress reports.

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In addition, some distance or independence between Canada and the United States needs to be established on this issue. As noted, there is a strong perception that Canadians are fighting an American instigated and an American-led war effort. This is also reinforced by a general perception that this government is already too closely aligned with the U.S. on other fronts.

The government should consider other opportunities to underscore Canadian sovereignty and a defence of Canadian interests as a means of downplaying this perception of an overly-close, dominant-subservient relationship between the U.S. and Canada. Speaking out on Arctic sovereignty, for example, while not directly related to the Afghanistan mission, would serve to soften or dispel this perception.

6. Identifying Effective Spokespeople

Given levels of mistrust in government and in politicians, spokespeople should be identified from other spheres that are viewed as credible and balanced in their perspective. This could include:

On-the-ground aid and development workers;

The Afghan people themselves;

Representatives of the Afghan government, including the Ambassador for Afghanistan in Canada; and

Canadian Forces officers stationed in Afghanistan as well as those who have returned from their deployment in Afghanistan (e.g. Corporal Paul Franklin).

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