

Gordon Smith, Centre for Global Studies, public administration, political science

Maybe Layton was right about Afghanistan

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Peace deal with the Taliban only way out, analyst says

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When New Democratic Party chief Jack Layton suggested last fall that talking to the Taliban might bring peace to Afghanistan, he was laughed out of court.

The major newspapers dismissed him as either naive or reprehensible. The Conservative government was contemptuous, as were the Liberals.

They called him Taliban Jack.

Eventually, Layton stopped talking about negotiating with the Taliban. Which is ironic, given that the idea is now gaining credibility among those who travel in more established circles.

Indeed, the latest figure to call for a political settlement to the Afghan conflict is a pillar of the Ottawa establishment. **Gordon Smith**, now director of the Centre for Global Studies at the **University of Victoria**, is Canada's former ambassador to NATO and a former deputy minister of foreign affairs. His *Canada in Afghanistan: Is it Working?* was done for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, a Calgary think-tank that is not known for being squishy on matters military.

Unlike Layton, Smith does not say Canada should pull its troops out of Afghanistan. Quite the contrary. He writes that Canadian troops should remain there past 2009 as part of the NATO-led force.

But he also writes that the current NATO strategy of trying to defeat the Taliban militarily cannot work.

"We do not believe that the Taliban can be defeated or eliminated as a political entity in any meaningful time frame by Western armies using military measures," he says.

The reasons for this are fourfold. First, the Taliban are still the dominant force among Pashtuns in Afghanistan's south, where Canadian troops are operating. NATO *bête noire* Mullah Omar "remains unchallenged as leader of the Taliban," Smith writes. "There is no alternative representing Pashtun interests who has more clout than he."

Second, neighbouring Pakistan "is highly ambivalent about crushing the Taliban insurgency." While technically on NATO's side in this matter, important elements of the Pakistani state apparatus, Smith writes, continue to support the Taliban as their proxy in Afghanistan – mainly as a way to fend off what they see as hostile Russian and Indian influences.

To destroy the Taliban would be to end Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, he says – which perhaps explains Islamabad's less than total support for the NATO mission.

Third, the NATO strategy of using air power and heavy armour is backfiring. So is the policy of opium eradication. One destroys Afghan lives, the other their livelihoods. The net result, writes Smith (and here he echoes reports from the London-based Senlis Council), is to make Afghans even more hostile to NATO troops.

Fourth, NATO countries don't have the will to fight a protracted war in a faraway country.

"If NATO states it will only be satisfied with a decisive military victory, the Taliban will call our bluff," Smith says. "The Taliban have demonstrated greater resolve, tactical efficiency and ability to absorb the costs of war over the long term than have NATO forces."

As a result, "talking to the Taliban" emerges as the only feasible solution. "Given the costs of war," he writes, "NATO needs to look candidly at the prospects – aware that there can be no guarantee – of a political solution."

That, in turn, would involve offering the Taliban a role in Afghanistan's government, knowing full well that they would demand as their price a more obscurantist, Islamist regime.

(This wouldn't be good news for women. But, as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission reported recently, life for many Afghan women isn't much good now – to such an extent that last year more than 200 set themselves on fire to avoid domestic abuse, forced marriage or rape by in-laws.)

Should the Taliban prove unwilling to talk, Smith writes, NATO should refocus its attention on the non-Pashtun north and, in effect, permit a return to the protracted, regionally based civil war that devastated Afghanistan in the '90s. Eventually, this might bring Mullah Omar to the bargaining table.

But if a political solution is not found, then NATO countries like Canada should think the unthinkable: We might lose; or, as Smith puts it, "there is a quite reasonable possibility that NATO may not succeed."

It's a grimly realistic paper. It's also in line with the thinking of other recent, unvarnished assessments of the Afghan war, including a report from the Senate defence committee.

Oh yes, and its key recommendation echoes that of Jack Layton. But my guess is that up in Ottawa, the people behind this war aren't going to be dismissing Smith as Taliban Gord.