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## Canada's new Afghan mission bolsters hope for 2014 end to war

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WASHINGTON—With Canada onside once again, U.S. officials are heading to this weekend's NATO summit with renewed momentum, aiming to persuade the fraying alliance that the struggle for Afghanistan will be over by 2014.

That revised timeline — which matches up with Ottawa's decision to leave 950 soldiers on a training mission after the Canadian combat operation ends next summer — is now the overriding goal for Friday's summit in Lisbon, senior U.S. officials said Wednesday.

As President Barack Obama huddled with Afghan advisers, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Foreign Secretary William Hague told reporters in Washington that both the U.S. and the U.K. see 2014 as a hard deadline representing a full handover to Afghan security forces.

"The Lisbon summit will be a demonstration of unity and affirmation of the strategy we are pursuing" toward a "full transition to Afghan security by 2014," said Clinton.

Hague, noting the U.K.'s recent moves to augment and accelerate its troop-training effort, said four years is a realistic timeline to build the Afghan National Security Forces, which currently number 264,000, into a force able to "lead and sustain their own security operations throughout Afghanistan by 2014.

The White House on Tuesday extended especially fulsome praise to Canada for its renewed commitment to Afghanistan. One White House adviser, Doug Lute, went so far as to say Ottawa's new plan put Canada "at the forefront of the overall transition in the mission over the coming years, which will be increasingly seeing NATO move into a supporting role as Afghan forces take the lead."

But the praise for Canada's reversal comes with a sense of deep relief for U.S. officials worried about other fractures in the war-weary alliance, according to Washington-based security experts.

"What Canada is doing is more than symbolic — there were very real concerns about the shortage of training forces and it is a very big deal that Canada now will meet that gap," said Caroline Wadhams, director for South Asia Security Studies at the Center for American Progress.

"But for the U.S. administration, Canada's decision comes in the context of fear that more and more partners will peel away from Afghanistan due to the unpopularity of the war.

"So with Canada onside, the Obama administration is trying to emphasize the 2014 timeline and create a sense of momentum at the Lisbon summit. They want to say to allies, 'This is not indefinite. Hang on just a little bit longer because an end is in sight.'"

Canadian officials in Washington declined Wednesday to discuss the politics behind the decision. Among D.C.-based Afghan experts, however, there was consensus that Ottawa made its move in the context of what one analyst described as "quiet but rather insistent U.S. pressure on Canada not to withdraw."

"Washington would regard Canada's continued participation in Afghanistan as a fairly high diplomatic objective," said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice-president for defence and foreign policy studies at the CATO Institute.

"Frankly the U.S. is just grateful for the semblance of any support, because in Washington today there is a pervasive fear that one by one the allies will desert.

"For Canada to have left Afghanistan outright, it would have really underscored the waning U.S. ability to influence its allies. And that problem is becoming more and more evident in any case."

Andrew J. Bacevich, a foreign policy scholar with Boston University and author of *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, told the *Toronto Star* he was deeply disappointed in Ottawa's decision.

"Canada's move may provide affirmation inside Washington, but I would hazard a guess that 80 per cent of Americans are unaware of the fact that we have any allies with us in Afghanistan, let alone Canadians," said Bacevich.

“As an American who greatly admires Canada, it baffles me that the Canadian people would go along with this because I fail to understand that Canada has interests in Afghanistan worth a single Canadian life.

“We Americans constantly do stupid things. But we expect more from Canada.”