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It's time to keep the peace again

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The federal election offered little debate on Canada's defence policy and the role of Canada's military. Yet Canada's role on the international stage is now in transition and in urgent need of clear direction.

After being engaged in Afghanistan for close to 10 years, Western forces in that country have not succeeded. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and other officials have confirmed that the armed conflict in Afghanistan between NATO forces and "insurgents" cannot be won militarily. Next month, Canada will end its combat mission and begin a much smaller mission training the Afghan military.

During the hard fighting in Afghanistan, Canada's military proved once again to be among the best small armies in the world. Not only did the Canadian military gain valuable expertise, it is also now very well equipped. Light armoured vehicles; light troop transports and heavy airlift make the Canadian military a very capable force. But what should we use it for?

Clearly, Canada's military should promote our interests and values. As much as ever, Canada's interest and values converge in the promotion of international peace and stability. Not only does that make sense for a middle power like Canada but recent events in the Middle East and North Africa clearly demonstrate that the world is more interconnected than ever before. Political uprisings, humanitarian emergencies and civil wars can no longer be ignored. What happens in distant parts of the world will have an impact on Canada's interests whether it's immigration, security, international trade or the environment.

Peacekeeping is a key tool in maintaining international order and it is also part of Canada's values - helping the less fortunate in war-torn regions of the world to find peace and a better life.

In recent years, United Nations peace operations have proved to be successful in restoring peace and stability around the globe. With over 65 field missions in all parts of the world under its belt, the UN has acquired expertise, both civilian and military, that is second to none.

The UN, though far from perfect, has made considerable improvements in the way peace operations operate after some of the seriously flawed missions the 1990s. UN peacekeeping effectiveness has earned the confidence of the international community. The UN now supports more troops in the field than any actor in the world other than the U.S.-more than the U.K., France, China and Russia put together. Many expect that the demand of international stabilization forces will increase in the years to come. Southern Sudan, Haiti, the Congo are all areas crying out for more peacekeeping.

Most importantly, UN peace operations provide unparalleled legitimacy to any international effort. Only the UN can offer a politically diverse but operationally capable mission -but only if countries like Canada invest in UN operations and provide advanced military and logistics capabilities.

Until the late 1990s, Canada had provided hundreds of troops and worked very hard to make UN peacekeeping an effective tool for peace and stability. Canada gained considerable influence and respect on the world stage by doing so. It made sense for Canada's interests as a middle power back then and it still does today. Despite the recent collapse of Canada's contribution to UN peacekeeping, Canadian public opinion continues to support peacekeeping as a primary role for the Canadian Forces.

In today's interconnected world, Canada's interests as a trading nation and middle power are best served by working toward a stable and peaceful world. United Nations peacekeeping remains one of the best tools to achieve that.

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A Canadian soldier walks with local children while on a foot patrol near Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Finbarr O'reilly, Reuters Files