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Editorial: Canada's Afghanistan Responsibility

The US mid-term election has come and gone. The results confirm that a substantial majority of Americans did not agree with the direction that their all-Republican government (president, senate, and house of representatives) was taking. This is a 'victory for democracy' far greater than anything the Americans have achieved in many overseas adventures.

In a symbolic concession to change, Donald Rumsfeld took the bullet for the president. Meanwhile, worldwide, US foreign policy can no longer be predicated on the assumption that US military power trumps all.

In Iraq, where the Republican's election losses have destroyed US influence, the US is now just one nation among several who must act together to clean up the mess. Despite the instability of the region, Iraq and its neighbours: Jordan, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kuwait are beginning to talk.

More significantly for Canada, in Afghanistan, US power has also been crippled. Mr Bush's futile pursuit of Osama bin Laden has led to a situation that is looking increasingly similar to Iraq.

Although part of the country is relatively stable under a US-backed government, the rest is experiencing increasing levels of civil war. A US war on drugs policy mandating the destruction of the poppy crop is not helping, particularly when much of the world suffers a shortage of medical opiates.

With US influence crippled, Canada and its troops now seem to be taking a lead in the security and reconstruction effort. However Canada does not have sufficient armed forces or the will to carry on a war, and the troops we have are too valuable to spend their time trying to defend against the rising insurgency.

As in Iraq, isn't it time to involve Afghanistan's neighbours: Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China to achieve regional stability? Could involvement of the region not lead to a more useful role, and over the long term, an exit strategy for Canada?

In Afghanistan, it may be time for the professionals of the Canada's Department of External Affairs, rather than politicians, to lead the conversation. ✍

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