THE WAR THAT NEVER SHOULD HAVE BEEN FOUGHT

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By Thomas Walkom, The Toronto Star, 30 January 2010

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But now the big powers have signalled that they've had enough. At a meeting in London on Thursday, the 42 countries of the NATO-led coalition – backed by 17 other nations with an interest in Afghanistan – agreed to start disengaging their forces by the end of this year.
They've also agreed to a last-ditch effort by Afghan president Hamid Karzai to forge a political compromise with the insurgent Taliban leadership.

True, there are also renewed promises to train the country's army and impossibly corrupt police force. The NATO powers and their friends insist that they are not abandoning the country and will continue to support the Afghan government for another 15 years.

But the bottom line is that the United States and its allies are getting out. They've had enough. The participants in this long-running civil war will have to work out something on their own.

At the very least, that would mean giving the Taliban a role in government. At the most, it would

mean letting the civil war continue until all sides are exhausted or until one of the factions wins.

From the beginning, the Afghan war was a badly conceived enterprise. Ostensibly, the country was invaded for reasons of self-defence: The United States had been attacked; under international law, it was authorized to respond.

In fact, Afghanistan's then-Taliban government had no direct role in the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington that precipitated this invasion. There is no evidence that the Taliban or its leader Mullah Omar knew of the planned attacks, authorized them or participated in them.

True, Al Qaeda, which now claims it was behind the attacks, had been operating from Afghanistan – as it operates from neighbouring Pakistan today.

But just as Pakistan's current government is unable or unwilling today to deal with Al Qaeda, so was Afghanistan's Taliban government in 2001.

When threatened with war unless he surrendered Al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, the best that Omar could come up with was an offer to send the terror chief to Pakistan.

In hindsight – given that this is where bin Laden appears to have ended up anyway – the U.S. might have been wiser to accept this offer and dispense with the war.

But it did not. Instead, with the support of Canada and other allies, it repeated the mistakes made by the Soviet Union two decades earlier. It enmeshed itself in a struggle it did not understand.

That struggle was the ongoing Afghan civil war, a complicated and chaotic dispute pitting ethnic group against ethnic group, city against countryside, tribal leaders against clerics, clan against clan and regional power bosses against one another – one in which all participants routinely changed sides and where betrayal was the norm.

The U.S. and its friends easily chased the Taliban out of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul.

And if, as Karzai suggested then, the victorious allies had made a deal with Taliban leader Omar, Western involvement in the war might have swiftly ended.

But the allies didn't do so. Now, with the Taliban's position far stronger than it was eight years ago, NATO has belatedly agreed to let Karzai convene a kind of constitutional convention that would include senior insurgent leaders.

The U.S. has even agreed to remove some of the Taliban's top leaders from the United Nations terror watch list, so they can attend this meeting. (Canadian Abousfian Abdelrazik may be bitterly amused by this. The Montreal resident, who made headlines after the Canadian government stranded him for six years in Sudan and who has never been charged with any crime, can't get his name off the UN list – meaning, among other things, that he can't open a bank account.)

All of this could be too late. Talks with the Taliban might have ended the conflict eight years ago. They might have worked even three years ago when New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton was mocked by members of the current Conservative government – and many in the media – for suggesting a negotiated solution to the war.

But now the Taliban know they need only wait. Barack Obama's baffling speech last month, in which the U.S. president simultaneously expanded the American war effort in Afghanistan and set a withdrawal date, demonstrated that his country was preparing to pack its bags and go home.

Thursday's London conference is a signal that the rest of the NATO-led coalition is planning to follow suit.

It's been a long war – longer (although far less deadly) than either World War I or II. It has also been pointless.

Canadians can pride themselves on the fact that their troops fought and died bravely. But we may want to ask our political leaders why they had to die at all.