Canadian foreign policy has rarely needed a thorough re-think more than it does now. And yet, the current level of debate in Canada over key international issues ranges from simplistic to non-existent, with few stops in between; thus we lack a reasoned and informed public discussion. Two examples concern Canada’s role in the newly minted G20 and Canada’s role in Afghanistan.

In 2010 Canada will host back-to-back G8 and G20 meetings. Later in the year there will be another meeting of the G20 in Korea. These meetings are important for the opportunities they provide to the Canadian government to safeguard and pursue Canada’s interests in the world.

Unfortunately, thus far the Canadian government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper has resisted the inevitable development of the G20. The rationale for this attitude remains obscure, but seems to rest on the conviction that it is better to be a member of a more exclusive club of eight than a club including twenty countries, despite the fact that the latter consists of major countries such as China and India. Another, somewhat less worthy, reason seems to be that the G20 is identified with Mr. Harper’s Liberal predecessor, Prime Minister Paul Martin. Notwithstanding these apprehensions, it is undoubtedly in Canada’s interest to make the G20 work. There will not be a return of the G8’s premier position.

It behooves Canada to show we deserve to be one of twenty. Canada may “make the cut” in 2010 but nothing is permanent in this sort of architecture. If twenty is indeed too many for effective action, another smaller group may yet emerge. French President Nicolas Sarkozy is already on record as preferring a grouping of fourteen or so, and he will chair both the G8 and the G20 in 2010. It would be wise for Canada now to be showing why we ought to be around the table. The relative size of our population, gross domestic product (GDP), and armed forces will inevitably dwindle in the decade ahead, and it won’t be as obvious in ten or fifteen years why we are indispensable to the group, even if it remained at twenty. Indeed it isn’t obvious to everyone even now.

Summits matter because we live in an increasingly interdependent world; the effectiveness of global governance is lagging behind the extent of interdependence. While there is a
plethora of international institutions, some big and some small, these institutions have proved remarkably resistant to change—they have outmoded mandates and decision-making systems. The consequence is an increasing number of global deadlocks and issues that require a degree of cooperation and coordination, and that that coordination is not available, or at least forthcoming, from existing institutions and arrangements.

Take the United Nations (UN). It is fine to say that everybody has an interest in climate change and that negotiations should therefore take place in the UN. But does anybody really think that 192 countries, varying in size from China and the United States to small island states, can negotiate anything of the complexity of climate change with its linked issues of energy, technology, security, and development?

It may not sound very democratic, but the world needs a steering committee to set agendas, determine the principles and parameters for deals, and to commission negotiators to prepare feasible proposals for more universal bodies. What we have seen over the last few years is that that committee has been transformed from the G8 to the G20 for global economic coordination. Moreover, it is “economic coordination” writ large. Reforming the governance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the financial dimensions of climate change, trade, and development have already been addressed by the G20, which is natural given the linkages amongst these issues.

Breaking global deadlocks requires making deals. One might think that focus and keeping issues separate would be simpler. But having a variety of such negotiations going on in separate places means that the trade-offs that need to be made in “grand bargains” won’t happen. “Grand bargains” are a fact of life on the international stage, where it is necessary for everyone to come out a winner.

At the time of writing in late fall 2009, it seems that geopolitical and security issues will still be pursued by the G8 (although some have even mentioned the G7—excluding Russia). Of course, the original intention of the G7 was that it was to deal only with economic issues. But, what happened is that when leaders met at the same time as a political crisis occurred, unsurprisingly they discussed it. The same will happen again with the G20, perhaps not in 2010 but sometime soon.

Moreover, if one thinks of the big issues on the international agenda—say the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran (subject to some doubt about what the Iranians really want), how could these be addressed without China present?

Canada has for decades pursued the goal of strengthening the multilateral system. This is not just a matter of “values” but of “interests.” These two notions are not mutually exclusive—in fact, policy should be based on interest and consistent with values.
It is time for Canada to accelerate the inevitable. There is an opportunity with the 2010 summits for Canada to be taking a lead. Canadians need and want to be “rule makers” rather than “rule takers.” Let’s show we can (again) perform credibly on the larger international stage. This is an opportunity to help move the really tough issues, such as climate change and Afghanistan.

Climate change is a little like the Middle East. Everybody knows what the contours of the final package must look like. The tough question is, “How does one get there from here?” Part of the answer is to ensure that all the key players can go away talking about their success—not just success in reaching a broad agreement but why the outcome is in the interest of their specific country.

Developed countries insist that developing countries take on binding targets—this can be done on a lagged basis (a principle well established in trade negotiations)—giving developing countries more time with the confidence that a reliable monitoring and verification system would provide regarding developed countries’ commitments. Each country can be a winner if there is a global collaborative research and development (R&D) effort—applying lessons from the International Space Station, the Large Hadron Collider, and the successful agricultural research network, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Research establishments can be placed strategically around the world. Not only Indonesia and Brazil would benefit from a new global priority on forests—Canada, Russia, and the United States could be net beneficiaries. Setting up a new intellectual property regime for renewable energy, clean coal, and power generation, with advanced market commitments, could be a positive sum game where every country would be a “winner.”

A wide range of commentators have thought through the actions required for a climate change approach, including targets for emission reductions, global cap-and-trade market arrangements, financing for adaptation, technology transfer, preventing deforestation as well as promoting reforestation, and cooperation on research and standards. Canada could lead by massaging the potential initiatives into win-win-win packages and persuading the major actors that they can each be winners.

Moving from opportunities to problems, at the top of the list for Canada is the lethal killing ground of Afghanistan. It is widely understood in Canada and elsewhere that the war is not going well. Everybody knows that it cannot be won by foreign militaries. But the level of debate in this country over how to remedy the situation is very low. The argument tends to be polarized between those who believe in the continuing threat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban as the reason why we cannot abandon Afghanistan, and those who believe that we should get out as soon as possible, or at least on the present schedule in 2011, because the mission is impossible.
Al-Qaeda remains a very real threat to the United States and many other countries, not just those fighting against it. One needs only to think of the activity of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, indeed all the way across northern Africa to Somalia and Yemen. President Obama stated in his speech announcing 30,000 more troops for Afghanistan that al-Qaeda terrorists, trained in the mountainous region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, have been recently arrested in the United States. It is true that even if there was “success” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qaeda’s franchised operations could and would turn up in many other parts of the world that are effectively beyond governance, domestic or international. But that doesn’t lead to the conclusion that we can walk away from Afghanistan and be indifferent to what happens in Pakistan.

The most likely outcome if all international forces left Afghanistan any time soon is that the country would descend into civil war. With no outside involvement the Taliban could well again take over the country. Pakistan would increasingly be weakened and beset with a civil war. This instability in Pakistan would run the risk that its nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of the Taliban. This prospect could even lead to conflict with India.

The objectives for Afghanistan as stated by President Obama have been considerably scaled back. The outcome of the last election, the continuing corruption, and the weakness of President Hamid Karzai’s government are all realities. Yet everybody knows the only hope for Afghanistan is that its government, including military and police, learns to stand on its own feet. Obama’s plan is to ramp up forces in 2010 to reach a peak in 2011. By 2011, the plan is that the Afghan military and police can stand on their own. There is, of course, no certainty of such an outcome.

There is an illusion in Canada that we can wind down our military engagement, and, as a substitute, step up our development engagement. The spread of the insurgency to parts of the country hitherto seen as safe bodes poorly for this approach. The reality is that there can be no development without security.

President Obama has made Afghanistan “his” war. The possibility of declaring victory any time soon and moving on is not on the horizon—despite the views of those who draw analogies with Vietnam. Obama made clear the big difference is that North Vietnam and the Viet Cong did not attack and continue to pose a direct threat to American citizens, but al-Qaeda did attack and is continuing to try to launch further attacks against not only the United States and its allies, but against many other countries.

Will the same thing happen as happened in 1969 when Prime Minister Trudeau wanted to pull all of Canada’s forces out of NATO Europe? What happened then was that Canada set off alarm bells with its decision to withdraw. The United States took a very strong line against the Canadian cuts to show to all its allies that it was going to fight Senator Mike Mansfield’s Senate Resolution to reduce US troops in Europe. The Europeans took a very strong line criticizing Canada to show the Americans how noisy they would be if the United States sought
to reduce its commitment. In short, Canada became the whipping boy; the decision was amended. Will the same thing happen in 2011? Already there is talk that Canada, instead of leaving, might move to a safer part of the country and focus on training the Afghan Army.

Anybody who has simple answers on this subject isn’t worth listening to. What we need, desperately, is a sophisticated, informed debate in Canada. We need to sort out our interests (deterring terrorism) and their implications. We need to think through what the implications are for what we decide on the Obama administration and Canada-US relations. We also need to think about our values. Are we really willing to walk away, having given people (in particular women and girls) a taste of human rights and democracy, because we are not prepared to pay the full price and stay the course?

I am inclined to believe Canada should remain militarily in Afghanistan beyond 2011, but in a training role. There may also be opportunities where Canadian Forces could help protect development assistance. Such assistance given in a form that promises rapid visibility in terms of results is essential. Other than for special-forces-type operations and self-defence, I would have Canada cease active pursuit of Taliban fighters in counter-insurgency operations. But I would most definitely not walk away in 2011.

I don’t know, however, with any certainty the answers to these challenges. I do know they are not receiving enough sensible attention. We cannot begin that debate too soon.