

The hard lessons not learned by Canada

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The country was too hasty in jettisoning its former human security and peacekeeping agenda.

Ian Davis

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As Canada and its NATO allies begin considering the lessons from the Libya mission, it is worth pausing to consider the implication of a recent report by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute into the lessons of the Afghanistan war for Canada's leaders.

The authors argue that a key rationale for the combat mission to Kandahar, one of the most difficult regions of Afghanistan, was to enable Canada to "raise its profile in the international community and among its NATO partners (especially the United States) and signal an end to the 'human security agenda' period of the Chrétien government."

It continues, "For the Army leadership as well, the commitment provided the opportunity to strike squarely at the mythology of peacekeeping." In other words, this was an opportunity for Canadians to show their mettle in delivering hard power and to shake-off the image of soft power wimps.

What should be examined, however, is an evaluation of the outcome of a decade-long deployment to Afghanistan from the end of 2001 through to the middle of 2011.

That the Canadian troops have an excellent reputation, served with distinction and suffered substantial casualties comes through loud and clear. But Canada has not given enough thought to the possibility that the war was, and continues to be, unwinnable.

The Taliban's resilience a decade after its toppling was again underlined only recently when it killed at least 17 people in a car bomb attack on a NATO convoy in Kabul, including one Canadian soldier, the 158th to die in connection with the Canadian military's operations in Afghanistan.

Some strategic and operational shortfalls are acknowledged in the report. These include national caveats among allies, said to "limit the alliance's ability to succeed politically and militarily." Also mentioned are failures among politicians and bureaucrats at home.

But the ever-changing mission objectives and counter-insurgency methods were flawed. Faced with a similar stalemate when he came to power in the Kremlin in 1985, after five years of war in Afghanistan and some 9,000 Soviet soldiers already dead, Mikhail Gorbachev quite rightly re-assessed the mission and pulled the plug.

Indeed, Canada appears to have jumped on the US and NATO power-projection bandwagon just as the wheels are coming off. The Obama administration is already moving beyond the counterinsurgency doctrine that has failed in Iraq and Afghanistan in adopting a new form of high-tech, low-budget and politically astute intervention, although not before minting yet another variant in Afghanistan. Elements of this "fight, build and talk" variant already underway include escalation of military pressure on the Haqqani network of insurgents, along with an open door for the network and other Taliban groups to hold direct talks with the US.

As the US-led NATO mission is already locked into troop drawdowns that are scheduled to bring all foreign combat troops home by 2014, this is effectively the last shot at counter-insurgency.

What Canada—or more precisely, the current political and military leadership—should have learned from Afghanistan is that they were too hasty in jettisoning their former human security and peacekeeping agenda. It was an approach less costly, in Canadian lives and treasure, and arguably more effective than the various US-led counter-insurgency doctrines applied in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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