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NATO AND CANADA IN AFGHANISTAN: BENEVOLENT INTERVENTION OR SELF-HELP?

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Sten Rynning. ***NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect.*** **Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012, 274 pp.**

Stephen M. Saideman. ***Adapting in the Dust: Lessons Learned from Canada's War in Afghanistan.*** **Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016, 167 pp.**

NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect by Danish political scientist Sten Rynning critically examines NATO's involvement in Afghanistan and assesses the significance of the Afghan intervention to the alliance itself. Rynning's central thesis is that NATO's performance in Afghanistan indicates a "liberal disconnect," or a retreat from geopolitical realism into liberal wishful thinking.[1] He argues that, as a result of the utopian thinking prevalent in the 1990s, the alliance has become deficient in its ability to formulate strategy, allowing universal values to take the place of defined interests as its guiding force. The disappearance of the Soviet Union left NATO's political leadership casting about for a *raison d'être*, which it found by casting the alliance as a benevolent force in support of the project of global governance and the spread of Western liberal values. According to Rynning, this new, universalist approach led NATO to abandon the constraints of its traditional Euro-Atlantic regional focus, leading it first to entanglements in the Balkans and ultimately to Afghanistan.

Rynning's book begins by examining the various schools of thought in the ongoing debate about the future of NATO. On one extreme are those who argue that NATO is obsolete and should be allowed to die an overdue death. On the other are those who wish to see it fully globalize and take on more fully the role of policeman of the international order. The author puts forth a third view, that NATO should return to its roots in collective security and reassert its Eurocentric regional identity, lest a universalist lack of focus be its undoing. Next, Rynning looks at the post-Cold War, pre-9/11 security environment that led NATO to engage in its first

[1] Sten Rynning, *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 4.

out-of-area missions; he then traces the history of the international intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 and the political decisions that led to NATO's involvement there.

Rynning then launches into the core of his book, analyzing the alliance's experience in Afghanistan. He argues that NATO was overenthusiastic about its role in Afghanistan before 2005, basing much of its campaign planning on flawed, over-optimistic assumptions. Rynning demonstrates how NATO was shocked almost into paralysis by the violence of the Taliban resurgence, losing credibility as the strategic leader it had pretended to be. Shifting to a slightly more positive note, the author then argues that NATO recovered from this shock and rationally redefined itself as an enabler (to the U.S.) rather than the leader in Afghanistan, pointing to signs of strategic coherence in the alliance's move toward an exit strategy. He concludes by drawing lessons for NATO's future, stressing the importance of tempering idealism with realistic purpose, constrained to the arena of Euro-Atlantic affairs. He reinforces the importance of NATO as a vehicle for U.S. influence in matters of Eurasian security, and expresses optimism about NATO's "rediscovery of itself" through a balancing of its well-meaning visionary tendencies against hard realities of European power and interests.

Canadian political scientist Stephen M. Saideman's monograph *Adapting in the Dust: Lessons Learned from Canada's War in Afghanistan* is the most recent scholarly work to be published about the subject at hand. The author's main focus is on what can be learned about Canada from a policy perspective by examining its involvement in Afghanistan. In order to set the stage for his inquiry, he first seeks to determine the extent to which the Canadian experience in Afghanistan was typical of the countries engaged there. More specifically, he looks at the common problems that plagued many of the allies in Afghanistan, namely those of maintaining political and public support for the war at home, and of coordinating interagency or "whole of government" operations in a complex, violent environment. Next, Saideman tackles the foreign policy question of why Canada chose (or was stuck with?) Kandahar as the area of responsibility for its troops. Saideman considers this the central question of his book since, as he puts it, "it tells us much about how Canadian politics operates when engaged in the world."[2]

The author then moves on to look at the mission through the lens of domestic politics, examining the shaping effect of a minority government on Canada's conduct of the war, as well as the performance of the major Canadian federal political parties in articulating their various positions on it. Saideman then shifts his analysis to the particularities of the Canadian experience in Afghanistan, beginning with the detainee controversy, which he considers to have been a canard. He then looks at the effectiveness of the "whole of government" approach, which he judges to have been somewhat successful yet unlikely to be repeated due to the amount of political exposure it created for the government. Saideman next addresses the question of civil-military relations in Canada, and whether the prominence of the military in steering the conduct of the war suggests a "militarization" of Canadian foreign policy or perhaps even threatens to usurp civilian control of the military – concerns he dismisses as overblown. Finally, the author turns to the roles of public opinion and the media in constraining Ottawa's war policy, giving credit to the former for being relatively mature and objective on the whole, while criticizing the latter for its uninspired editorial decisions and narrow focus on hot-button topics. The book then concludes by considering broad lessons for Canadian policy and institutions going forward. Saideman asserts that the Afghanistan experience, for better and for worse, will shape Canadian foreign and domestic politics much more profoundly than any other military intervention since the end of the Cold War.

[2] Stephen M. Saideman, *Adapting in the Dust: Lessons Learned from Canada's War in Afghanistan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 11.

Taken together, these two books provide excellent policy insight into Canada’s longest war and the international politics of the alliance context in which it took place. Both volumes are excellently researched, balanced works that are appropriately circumspect about an uncertain future, while nevertheless teasing out the key lessons and themes from dispassionate analysis of their chosen subjects. Despite the end of Canadian military involvement in Afghanistan in 2014, the international intervention there continues. It will therefore be years before historians can even begin to arrive at any kind of consensus as to whether or not the undertaking can be judged a successful one, and if so by what standard. Nonetheless, there is value in asking how things came to be the way they are. Using the context provided by Rynning’s and Saideman’s books as a point of departure, this paper will examine the particular circumstances that led NATO to take a leading role in Afganistan, and Canada in turn to take a central role in the costliest phase of NATO’s Afghan adventure. The paper will demonstrate that in both cases, despite all rhetoric to the contrary, the fate of Afghanistan itself was at best of secondary interest to NATO and Canada, as both were motivated by reasons of their own to become involved there. The result, in both cases, was strategic incoherence. The paper will proceed by conducting analysis along two lines of inquiry: 1) the conditions that led to NATO’s initial commitment to command the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003; and 2) the conditions that led Canada to commit to the combat mission in Kandahar in 2005, its largest contribution to the Afghanistan intervention.

NATO in Afghanistan

In late 2002, the American military retaliation in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks had apparently culminated, and the United States began turning its attention in earnest to Iraq. Troops needed to be freed up for the buildup against Saddam Hussein. The U.S. therefore looked to its allies and to the United Nations to fill the void in Afghanistan, in order to prevent the formation of the same kind of power vacuum that had incubated the Taliban. The campaign of 2001-02 had gone well enough that it appeared al Qaeda and the Taliban had been routed, and the enthusiasm that surrounded the installment of the Karzai government made the prospect of protracted insurgency seem remote. In order to entice European allies to contribute troops, the Afghan effort was presented as a reconstruction and nation-building enterprise with the aim of fostering a democratic, pro-Western Afghan government which would deny the country as a base for any future terrorist activities by al Qaeda or its ilk.[3] As some have argued, the Afghan phase of the U.S. "Global War on Terror" ended very soon after 9/11; what followed was less a war than a multinational military intervention, if not outright occupation, aimed to restore order and provide the stability required for civilian governance to assert itself.[4] The architects of this putatively benevolent occupation did not foresee, in the optimistic days of 2002, any requirement to prepare for a resurgent Taliban to mount a campaign of increasingly violent resistance against the new government and its western sponsors.

As the U.S. turned its eyes on Iraq, many of the allies it looked to for support in Afghanistan were part of NATO. Since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, NATO had been suffering from disunity. With its main adversary gone, the alliance's reason to exist came into question. A decade into its post-Cold War slump, the 9/11 attacks gave NATO a new focus. Article 5, the North Atlantic Treaty's collective defence clause, was invoked for the first time in history. The alliance found a new purpose in fighting terrorism

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[3] "ISAF's mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014) (Archived)," NATO, 1 September 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm.

[4] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Changing US Security Strategy: The Search for Stability and the "Non-War" against "Non-Terrorism,"* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013), 2.

outside its nominal Euro-Atlantic theatre of operations, in the form of what came to be termed "out of area" security operations.

However, by the spring of 2003, the very high level of solidarity generated in NATO by the attacks had largely subsided.[5] The U.S. decision to invade Iraq caused deep divisions with NATO, causing great strain within the alliance. As infamously put forward by George W. Bush in his "Axis of Evil" speech, the U.S. saw the greatest threat to its security in the conflation of radical Islamist terror, so-called "rogue states," and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.[6] As it later became clear, the Bush administration actively sought to create linkages between the 9/11 attacks and Iraq, even as early as within hours of the actual events in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania.[7] The U.S. insisted on this putative link between Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda, and the 9/11 attacks in order to advance its cause for war, but key members of NATO did not agree with the logic. In particular, much to Washington's annoyance, the French and German governments staunchly opposed any military "adventure" seeking to effect regime change in Iraq.[8] The transatlantic war of words reached its peak early in 2003 when U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld publicly dismissed France and Germany as "has-beens" of the diplomatic world.[9] In retaliation, the French and Germans, backed by the Belgians, refused to support American attempts to reinforce Turkey in preparation for a new Iraq war, doing real damage to NATO's integrity.[10] Afghanistan would give NATO a new

[5] John Lewis Gaddis, "Grand Strategy in the Second Term," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (2005): 6.
[6] George W. Bush, "The President's State of the Union Address," speech, The United States Capitol, Washington, DC, 29 January 2002, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.
[7] "Bush's War: Part One," *Frontline*, 24 March 2008, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/bushswar/view/.
[8] Toby Helm and Ben Fenton, "Germany and France warn Bush on Iraq," *The Telegraph*, 19 February 2002, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1385362/Germany-and-France-warn-Bush-on-Iraq.html.
[9] Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 115.
[10] *Ibid*., 116.

constructive purpose, and provide an opportunity to heal the wounds inflicted over the question of Iraq.

After the initial burst of American offensive military action in Afghanistan in 2001-02, the Bush White House was adamant that a follow-up of comprehensive nation-building was not on the agenda. Instead, quick-impact, low-cost reconstruction projects were ordered.[11] However, it soon became apparent that the fledgling government of Hamid Karzai would not become self-sustaining on its own. This led Washington to back down from its outright opposition to a nation-building, particularly as several NATO countries that were part of the coalition in Afghanistan thought that the alliance could play a positive role in this connection, as will be detailed below, not only to help Afghanistan but to patch itself up after the imbroglio over Iraq.[12] The international military force in Kabul, known as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), was initially commanded by a British officer, followed by a Turk, and then by a joint Dutch-German headquarters. But by 2003 it was becoming increasingly less obvious which nation would be willing and able to command it next. After the first three six-month rotations of national command, it was suggested that command of ISAF be turned over to NATO itself, which would give member states a freer hand in contributing whatever troops they could, rather than trying to put together complex high-level command elements. This arrangement would also validate NATO's new, post-Cold War *raison d'être*. On 11 August 2003, NATO formally took command of the ISAF. Brussels immediately became seized with planning the growth of the force's structure and mandate.

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[11] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 98.

[12] Michael R. Gordon, "NATO Chief Says Alliance Needs Role in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 21 February 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/21/world/threats-responses-afghan-security-nato-chief-says-alliance-needs-role.html.

Hence, the adoption of the ISAF by NATO had effects at the political and strategic levels. At the former, it helped salve the wounds to the alliance's cohesion that had been inflicted by the Iraq debate. At the latter, by giving NATO a new mandate outside its traditional theatre, it gave the alliance a new sense of purpose in a post-Warsaw Pact world.[13] At the operational level, as alluded to above, it had the added effect of simplifying national command arrangements. When the ISAF was first formed in late 2001, it was in tandem with the existing American-led force operating under the rubric of Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF). Each force had its own focus, with ISAF implementing a UN-backed stability mandate in Kabul while OEF forces continued their counterterrorist campaign against al Qaeda and Taliban remnants in the east and south, slowly shifting to counterinsurgency after 2003.[14] As noted above, from its inception the ISAF was primarily a European mission commanded by a succession of individual NATO members. Turning it over to NATO made it more easy for smaller members to contribute, particularly those which lacked the capability to command at that level. Case in point, the country which suggested the NATO takeover – Canada – did so specifically because it had been slated to command following the Dutch-German rotation, yet lacked the requisite command and control capacity.[15]

On the surface, U.S. and NATO strategic goals in Afghanistan seemed coherent at this stage. Both OEF and the ISAF were working in parallel, ostensibly contributing to regional and global security. The former, by killing and capturing al Qaeda members and their sponsors, and the latter, by providing a safe and secure environment for development of governance structures

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[13] Elaine Sciolino, "Drifting NATO Finds New Purpose with Afghanistan and Iraq," *The New York Times*, 23 February 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/23/world/drifting-nato-finds-new-purpose-with-afghanistan-and-iraq.html.
[14] Valentina Taddeo, "U.S. Response to Terrorism: A Strategic Analysis of the Afghanistan Campaign," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 2 (2010): 30.
[15] Terry Terriff, "Fear and Loathing in NATO: The Atlantic Alliance after the Crisis over Iraq," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 5, no. 3 (2004): 429.

in Kabul. But the ISAF's role took on increasing prominence as Washington turned a baleful eye on Iraq. The U.S. government of the day seemed content with this trade-off, as a more prominent ISAF made it more likely that European nations would be willing to provide troops for the mission, freeing up American forces. This shift, however, caused strategy-making for Afghanistan to become increasingly subjected to alliance politics. The overall effect was an inversion of first priorities. As Bird and Marshall pithily put it, "NATO policy was driven more by concerns over what Afghanistan could do for NATO, than what NATO could do for Afghanistan."[16] Thus, as ISAF troops sought to provide stability in Kabul, Brussels saw an opportunity to stabilize NATO itself. In the optimistic climate of 2003, with the incipient Taliban insurgency yet to make itself felt, this seemed like a win-win for the alliance.

During the ISAF's early days in Kabul, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was busy making efforts to drum up support for the Afghanistan coalition, so that U.S. troops would be freed up for the upcoming invasion of Iraq.[17] When NATO took over command of the force, it became easier for nations to contribute troops, which in turn created an opportunity for the ISAF's area of responsibility to expand beyond Kabul. The Karzai government, whose reach was effectively nonexistent beyond the capital region, and whose national army was rudimentary at best, was fully behind this expansion.[18] The ISAF expansion plan called for a phased counter-clockwise progression, with the area of responsibility extending first to the north, then in succession to the west, south and east. The aim was to allow the ISAF, and thus NATO, to take centralized control of the various single-nation reconstruction efforts going on around the country, coordinating the projects themselves as well as the provision of security to facilitate

[16] Bird and Marshall, *Afghanistan*, 154.
[17] Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 94.
[18] *Ibid*.

them. Despite this ambitious plan, and despite NATO Secretary General George Robertson's warning that the alliance's very credibility was at stake in Afghanistan, many alliance members were still hesitant to commit the quantities of troops, equipment and funds necessary for such an enterprise.[19] In its haste to rejuvenate itself, NATO very likely bit off more than it could chew, so to speak.

This overreach, and the internal incoherence that characterized it, was becoming increasingly evident to the officials put in charge of implementing the ISAF's mandate on an operational level. Rather than clear, coherent, top-down strategy, the driving force behind high-level decisions appeared to be the alliance's internal politics. In his memoirs, retired Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier, who commanded the ISAF in its second NATO rotation, recalls that:

> It was crystal clear from the start that there was no strategy for the mission in Afghanistan. […] People at the NATO headquarters were talking about all kinds of pie-in-the-sky ideas for Afghanistan, but they had no strategy, no clear articulation of what they wanted to achieve, no political guidance and few forces. […] NATO also seemed to be dominated by jealousies and small, vicious political battles. […] It was more important within the alliance that every nation get to build up its own little fiefdom than it was to put together a solid team for a successful mission.[20]

Hillier's "little fiefdoms" are best exemplified by the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) which sprung into existence across Afghanistan. The concept of the PRT, first elaborated by the American military, was to bring together civilian and military actors capable of implementing small-scale development projects in rural regions as well as providing security for these projects. As a joint civil-military organization, the ideal PRT would maximize coordination between development agencies, external and local security forces, and local authorities, thereby fostering both stability and governance. In practice, the concept was never so tidy or well integrated.

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[19] Terriff, "Fear and Loathing in NATO," 432.
[20] Rick Hillier, *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), 288-289.

While most PRTs consisted of somewhere between 50 and 100 personnel, no standardized structure was agreed upon. The size, composition, and civil-military balance of each PRT was determined by its responsible nation according to its own priorities and limitations.[21] Even with the ISAF under NATO command, therefore, each of the various PRTs across Afghanistan remained firmly under the sway of its own capital rather than any central in-theatre authority. In a report drafted for the U.S. Congressional Research Service in 2008, Paul Gallis and Vincent Morelli note that, "the PRTs operate without an overarching concept of operations, do not provide a common range of services, do not have a unified chain of command and often do not coordinate with each other or exchange information on best practices."[22]

This lack of coordination and integration meant that the work of the PRTs across Afghanistan was not synchronized in any meaningful way. Despite the incorporation of civilian development officials in the teams' leadership, the dominant influence in most PRTs came from the military component. This meant that PRTs tended to prioritize small-scale, quick-payoff projects aimed at creating effects as swiftly as possible.[23] Driven by perceived local needs and by military expediency, these small reconstruction projects tended to be out of step with larger international aid and development programs conducted at the national level by external government agencies and by Kabul-based NGOs.[24] Compounding the problem, many of the countries running PRTs saw their national development strategy for Afghanistan through the lens of their own PRTs' local priorities, as a result tailoring their entire aid programs in accordance

[21] Peter Viggo Jakobsen, *PRTs in Afghanistan: Successful but Not Sufficient*, DIIS Report 2005:6 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2005), 17.
[22] Paul Gallis and Vincent Morelli, *NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 7.
[23] Jakobsen, *PRTs in Afghanistan*, 19.
[24] Seth G. Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 22.

with these limited views rather than a holistic, Afghan national perspective.[25] Bringing NATO into Afghanistan may therefore have brought more nations to the table, but it failed to create a unity of purpose from a development perspective.

NATO's failure to synchronize its members' reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan was not the worst of its problems. Even more central to the incoherence of the alliance's efforts in Afghanistan was the fact that ISAF contributors could not even agree on what the main problem – the main source of instability – actually was. The debate generally split the contributors into two camps: those who viewed the insurgency as the main obstacle to the development of effective governance, and those who viewed the lack of effective governance as the cause of the insurgency.[26] This circular "chicken or egg" debate prevented NATO and ISAF from developing a common understanding of the root causes of Afghanistan's predicament. The conundrum was never resolved. As they undertook their perilous tasks of simultaneously fighting an insurgency and rebuilding a shattered country, foreign troops and development workers found their work tortuously complicated and frustrating. The complexity may have been inevitable, but the lack of fundamental agreement in regard to root causes made the formulation of clear, overarching strategic priorities all but impossible. The result was that the ISAF found itself stymied by a modern-day "Catch-22" – no stability without development; no development without stability.

Canada in Kandahar

Canada's five-year military mission in Kandahar from 2006-2011 provides a good case study for the incoherence of the overall NATO-ISAF effort. The inconsistencies and frustrations of the Canadian mission were a microcosm of the larger intervention. The Canadian experience in Kandahar is particularly relevant due to the central importance of that province to the Taliban

[25] *Ibid*., 21-22.
[26] Gallis and Morelli, *NATO in Afghanistan*, 7.

movement, which originated there in 1994, and to Afghanistan itself. No attempt to stabilize Afghanistan could succeed without also stabilizing the country's Pashtun south, of which Kandahar is the heartland. The standard orthodoxy about the key to success in Afghanistan was enunciated by U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, who commanded ISAF from 2009-2010. Consciously or unconsciously echoing Lyndon B. Johnson's "hearts and minds" statement about the Vietnam War, McChrystal told the media that gaining the support of and protecting the Afghan people was fundamental to the success of the entire intervention.[27] If we accept the validity of this thesis, then Kandahar as the heart of the Pashtun south and the birthplace of the Taliban would very likely be considered the vital ground of the campaign.

Numerically, Canada contributed the sixth-largest troop contingent to the mission in Afghanistan, or the fifth-largest in proportion to the size of its army.[28] As one of the closest allies of the U.S., Canada had been involved militarily in Afghanistan since the early days of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, and saw a clear role for itself in both the security and development facets of the mission. When NATO took over command of the ISAF and began expanding its area of responsibility, the large European contributors scrambled for the quieter northern, central and western (non-Pashtun) areas of the country, which were seen as safer and less likely to require any offensive use of force. The Taliban's homeland in the south and its rugged mountain sanctuary in the east were mostly left to the U.S., its Anglophone allies, and the Dutch. As the insurgency began to grow, NATO's solidarity was once again strained by the restrictive rules of engagement, so-called "caveats," placed by most European nations on their troop contingents,

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[27] Kristi Keck, "U.S. must win Afghan hearts and minds, commander says," *CNN*, 28 September 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/09/28/afghanistan.obama/index.html?eref=rss_politics.
[28] Saideman, *Adapting in the Dust*, 22.

largely preventing them from using force in any manner other than self-defence.[29] Rather than burden-sharing, burden-shifting seemed to be the order of the day.

With the U.S. and Britain focused primarily on Iraq, and the European contingents ensconced in the safer regions, Canada asked for and was given military responsibility for Kandahar Province. The vital ground in what was ever more obviously a counter-insurgency campaign was entrusted to a country whose land forces had not seen significant combat in over half a century. The initial Canadian contingent in Kandahar, 2,500 strong but including only about 800 actual combat troops and no helicopters, stumbled along for almost three years before being reinforced. The Canadians were responsible for a geographic area roughly the size of Nova Scotia, inhabited by more than a million people. Instead of being the result of any strategy, this situation was brought about by political considerations in Western capitals.[30] Rather than being disposed in accordance with capabilities, strengths, or weaknesses, troop contingents in Afghanistan were assigned according to the amount of risk individual countries' governments were prepared to accept. "If we are not willing to pay what winning is expected to cost," remarks renowned British-American strategist Colin S. Gray, "then we ought not to be fighting at all."[31] NATO members clearly saw value in participating in the Afghanistan mission, but most seemed to be more concerned with doing so at minimal cost than with ensuring success through an objective calculation of ends and means.

Despite Canada's apparent acceptance of higher risk for its troops in Afghanistan, Ottawa's conception of ends and means was also, ultimately, politically calculated. Roughly halfway through the Kandahar deployment, in 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared

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[29] Bird and Marshall, *Afghanistan*, 219.
[30] *Ibid*., 158.
[31] Colin S. Gray, "Concept Failure? COIN, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Theory," *Prism* 3, no. 3 (2012): 28.

that "a decade of war is enough" and that Canadians would have "done [their] bit" by 2011.[32] This suggests that Harper had no definite end-state in mind for the Canadian mission, other than that of having gone on for an arbitrarily long period of time. In the same year, a parliamentary committee headed by former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley concluded that a Canadian withdrawal based on a fixed end date would likely result in increasing the burden on Canada's allies.[33] The Harper government's insistence on an exit date of 2011, to which it adhered three years later, shows that the mission's success was not linked to any particular outcome. This in turn suggests that Canadian military policy goals in Afghanistan were driven not by any concern for the state of Afghanistan or its people, but rather by a calculation of costs in blood and treasure against the benefits of being a good ally and a willing partner in a risky multilateral undertaking. In other words, from Ottawa's point of view, the strategic value of Canada's mission in Kandahar was determined not by its outcome but by its cost.

Canada's true strategic interest in Afghanistan therefore had much less to do with that country than it did in Canada's relationship with the U.S. According to Rick Hillier, Ottawa was eager to demonstrate to Washington that it was willing to do its fair share in the so-called "Global War on Terror," and sought to do so by obtaining a highly visible assignment for Canadian troops in Afghanistan.[34] As George Petrolekas, a retired colonel and former strategic advisor to the Chief of the Defence Staff, recalls, "the die was cast to go to Kandahar, the most dangerous region of Afghanistan then, for reasons of national prestige and nothing more."[35]

[32] "Harper says 2011 'end date' for Afghanistan mission," *CBC News*, 10 September 2008, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/harper-says-2011-end-date-for-afghanistan-mission-1.746890.
[33] Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, *Final Report* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2008), 33.
[34] Hillier, *A Soldier First*, 343.
[35] George Petrolekas, "Now that we've left Afghanistan, time for deeper questions about what happened," *The Globe and Mail*, 14 March 2014, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/now-that-weve-left-afghanistan-we-need-deeper-questions-about-what-happened/article17496415/.

Canada's land forces were not equipped for sustained combat, especially against a guerrilla opponent, and Canadian troops' overseas experience consisted mostly of lightly-armed peacekeeping missions and humanitarian interventions. And yet here they were in Kandahar, the Taliban heartland, unrestrained by caveats as were their European allies. This was an interesting role reversal for the Canadian military, which had gained a reputation in previous deployments for being kept on a very tight leash by its government. As recently as two years before, in Kabul, the Canadian battalion commander nominally subordinate to ISAF needed approval direct from Ottawa for "almost every detail" of "any missions beyond a routine patrol."[36]

Ironically, with a much more dangerous assignment for its troops in Kandahar, the Canadian government seemed unconcerned by details on the ground. The primary concern was to demonstrate solidarity with the U.S. following Canada's recent refusal to participate in two key U.S. military initiatives: the invasion of Iraq and the establishment of a continental missile defence program.[37] Robust support for the NATO mission in Afghanistan seemed to provide an opportunity to make up for these two strikes against Canada. What might actually be going on in Kandahar mattered little to politicians in Ottawa. Former Prime Minister Paul Martin recalled later that his government "didn't have detailed discussions about the challenges of Afghanistan."[38] Canadian military officials did not do much to inform their political masters of the growing potential for the mission to be a violent one. Even after the political director of the Canadian PRT in Kandahar City was killed in a suicide car bomb attack in early 2006, military briefings still referred to the Canadian role in Kandahar as being one of "robust peace support."[39] Meanwhile, public discourse about the mission seemed to be based on a clearer view of the

[36] Hillier, *A Soldier First*, 308.
[37] Stein and Lang, *The Unexpected War*, 184.
[38] Paul Martin, quoted in Stein and Lang, *The Unexpected War*, 244.
[39] Stein and Lang, *The Unexpected War*, 186.

developing situation on the ground, with mainstream news outlets openly referring to a growing Iraq-style insurgency.[40]

Despite the increasing violence, Canadian politicians remained oddly out of touch with the reality of the Kandahar mission through its first year. Former Minister of National Defence Bill Graham recalls the mission depicted to him in terms of reconstruction, with lightly armed troops visiting Afghan villages to “make love to the people” and “kill the bad guys.”[41] (Presumably – hopefully – Graham is using the phrase “make love” in its archaic sense of courting someone’s affection.) “Nobody used the word *war* to describe the mission,” Graham goes on. “We were probably drinking too much of our own bathwater.”[42] Once the first year of the mission had gone by, however, it seems clear that the government had disabused itself of these hopeful notions. In its 2007 report to Parliament, the Standing Committee on National Defence concluded that “the [Kandahar] mission is not, and never has been, anything akin to a peacekeeping mission.”[43] What is not clear is whether the government’s initial failure to grasp the reality of the situation in Kandahar was because the military failed to interpret it correctly, or because the military leadership persisted in telling politicians what they seemed to want to hear. The fact that this question does not seem to have mattered politically reinforces the idea that the outcome in Kandahar, or even in Afghanistan as a whole, was never of primary importance to Canada strategically.

Conclusion

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[40] “Ceremony honours Canadian diplomat killed in Afghanistan,” *CBC News*, 17 January 2006, http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ceremony-honours-canadian-diplomat-killed-in-afghanistan-1.575838?ref=rss.
[41] Bill Graham, quoted in Stein and Lang, *The Unexpected War*, 186.
[42] *Ibid*.
[43] House of Commons, Standing Committee on National Defence, *Canadian Forces in Afghanistan* (Ottawa: Communication Canada – Publishing, 2007), 14.

The geneses of NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan and of Canada’s mission in Kandahar were both motivated by external interests that were only circumstantially linked to Afghanistan. High-minded public declarations aside, the fate of that unfortunate country and its long-suffering people was never of primary interest to the North Atlantic alliance nor to Canada. This is supported by the fact that NATO, in 2003, was above all else concerned with finding a salve for the wounds it suffered during infighting over the U.S. decision to invade Iraq without the sanction of the UN. Canada, for its part, was searching during that period for a way to patch up its relationship with the U.S. after the twin refusals to participate in Iraq and in missile defence. These were important reasons for NATO and Canada to do what they did, but ultimately they point to the fact that the core interests of both were at best circumstantially linked to Afghanistan. Because neither the alliance nor Canada saw its core interests tied to the fate of Afghanistan, both approached their involvements there with an initially optimistic, under-resourced approach. As the insurgency intensified and the war dragged on, finding themselves on the back foot, both were forced to double down in order to stave off catastrophe. But sunk costs are not a basis for strategy. The most rational calculations of ends, ways and means in Afghanistan only came when Brussels and Ottawa shifted their focus to capacity building as a prelude to exit.

As Sten Rynning and Stephen M. Saideman so ably demonstrate in their books, there are valuable policy lessons for NATO and for Canada going forward; these lessons will continue to become more clear as time passes. NATO can take lessons from its Afghan experience that will help it recover from its “liberal disconnect,” strengthening the Atlantic alliance and renewing its purpose on a foundation of collaborative European security. For Canada’s part, the applicability of Afghanistan’s lessons will depend of where and in what form future interventions happen.

Alliance obligations being what they are, the *where* might not be entirely up to Canada, and the world is not short of potential other Afghanistans. As they become more clear, the final lessons from Afghanistan may be of greater use than might be expected. But it has been long enough since the beginning of the West's Afghan entanglement that lessons which can be drawn from its initial conditions – and the incoherence they engendered – are by now quite clear. The resulting end state, when it comes, may therefore not come as such a surprise. Whatever that end may be, it seems evident that nothing meaningful can be achieved if the basic premise for war is dishonest. It should therefore never be forgotten that NATO and Canada asked not what they could do for Afghanistan, but rather asked what Afghanistan could do for them.

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