

Afghanistan's lessons weren't just military

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Canadian troops fought in Afghanistan for a decade, and the Canadian Forces suffered substantial casualties. The country's military and political leadership learned on the job about the costs of war, the intractability of counterinsurgency warfare and the difficulties of managing an increasingly unpopular conflict through a prolonged period of domestic political turmoil. But what did Canadians learn?

The first lessons can be derived from the Canadian military's experiences in Kabul from 2003 to the beginning of 2006. Here, Canadians played an important role because they had capable officers in command of substantial numbers of troops able to act with force at a time when Canada's partners were not. And the Canadian Forces' intelligence resources were as good or better than any others in the theatre, America's excepted.

Simultaneously, able diplomats ran the newly created embassy and directed the country's aid program. At a time when NATO's International Security Assistance Force was only just being established, this confluence of abilities and power gave Canada a more prominent voice than it usually achieves in coalition operations.

As ISAF expanded over Afghanistan, and the U.S. took on the director's role, Canada's influence shrank. But because the Canadians fought in Kandahar with great skill, this influence was not completely lost. Soldiers who perform well in action always matter. The training system in Canada from the first rotation to the last produced well-trained battle groups able to adapt to changes in Taliban tactics.

Very simply, the battle groups put into the field were as well prepared, well led and, over time, well equipped as any Canadian soldiers have been. Their record, and the record of the governments that supported it, looks very good.

But Ottawa must be very wary of future alliance operations. Canada will never conduct a major operation abroad on its own, but, at the same time, can't escape the conclusion that NATO did not function well in Afghanistan. The alliance went to war, but its members hamstrung ISAF's operations with caveats that made military success ever harder to achieve.

Canada initially imposed its own caveats but lifted them early in 2006; many allies retained theirs. This greatly affected Canadian commanders and soldiers in Kandahar, inflicted unnecessary casualties and forced them to rely on U.S. resources, the only ones that could be counted on. At the same time, most NATO members were unwilling to commit troops to Kandahar, even when a single battle group of Canadians faced a major Taliban offensive in 2006. Unconstrained military commitments will be essential if Canada should ever again wish to place its soldiers and treasure into a major NATO operation. Anything less will call into question Canada's membership in the alliance.

Public opinion during a war is a critical component of national will, but it's fragile. If Americans and NATO were unclear why they were fighting in Afghanistan, then Canadians were similarly confused. If Canada's political leaders were inconsistent in their aims, and if there were no clear strategy behind the nation's actions, then no one should be surprised that public opinion turned against the war.

At the same time, the political manoeuvring over the war during a succession of minority governments also weakened public support. Politicians always strive to gain advantage, but they need to realize that their posturing will have a deleterious effect on support for any war we choose to fight.

The Afghan war was a just one, and Canada was right to participate. The Canadian Forces served with distinction and, though our soldiers paid a heavy price, they fought with honour and courage. The military forged its leadership for the next generation in Kandahar, and learned significant military lessons. But unless our politicians also grasp the lessons of Afghanistan, the price will have been too high.

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