

NATO coalition in Afghanistan bred mistrust, report says

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If there is a lesson to be learned from Canada's 10 years of war in Afghanistan it may be to mistrust NATO.

Two leading Canadian military historians, Jack Granatstein and David Bercuson, have just conducted a review of the "Lessons Learned" in Afghanistan for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and they conclude "Canada should think long and hard" before entering into any coalition similar to NATO's operations in Afghanistan.

"We cannot escape the conclusion that NATO has not functioned well, either politically or militarily, in Afghanistan," their report says.

NATO members hamstrung operations in Afghanistan by imposing severe restrictions on the use of troops and the patchwork of caveats made it difficult for commanders to coordinate troop movements and battles.

"This greatly affected Canadian commanders and soldiers in Kandahar, inflicted unnecessary casualties and forced them to rely on U.S. resources, the only military resources that could be counted on, for succour," the study says.

"Less constrained military commitments and greater political will from NATO members will be essential if Canada should ever again wish to place its soldiers and treasure into a major long-lasting NATO operation," they conclude. "Anything less must call into question Canada's membership in the alliance."

While praising the performance of Canada's soldiers in Afghanistan, saying they served with distinction and adjusted well as the Taliban insurgency increased, the study notes Canada's political leaders and bureaucrats were much less proficient.

"The political nature of the mission became even more unclear even as the military nature became more focused," the report says.

"Canada was handicapped in its goal of fitting the mission to the circumstances of a high intensity insurgency because both NATO and the United States did not clearly define a new strategy for Afghanistan until 2009," the historians said.

Yet Ottawa "had no impact whatever on key U.S. decisions regarding Afghanistan," even when those decision directly impacted Canadian soldiers, the report says.

The study is critical of political infighting among Canadian bureaucrats for control of policy, saying it destroyed one of the most effective Canadian assistance programs in Afghanistan, the use of a Strategic Advisory Team of senior Canadian Forces officers who worked as strategic planners in Afghan government departments.

Officials in the department of foreign affairs and international trade resented the military's control of the advisory teams and did their best to close them down, succeeding finally in 2008 when General Rick Hillier retired as Chief of the Defence Staff.

“The tussle between departments for control in Afghanistan was less than edifying, and if Canada ever again aims at a Whole of Government approach abroad, the Prime Minister must provide early and clear direction and co-ordination to prevent such squabbling from occurring,” the report says.

Canada’s political leaders are also criticized for failing to communicate their war aims to the public as the situation in Afghanistan intensified.

Political manoeuvring and sham fights in Ottawa through a series of minority governments greatly weakened public support for the war, the study says.

“If Canada’s political leaders were inconsistent in their aims and explanations of them, and if there was no clearly evident strategy behind the nation’s actions abroad, no one should be surprised that public opinion turned against the war,” the authors say.