How the Mission in Afghanistan Changed Canada

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[Series] From the Afghan detainee scandal to our more bellicose presence on the world stage, the legacy of the mission remains inextricably tied to the future of peace in Afghanistan.

This is Part 3 in a three-part series examining the outcomes and legacy of the Afghan war. Part 1 outlined how the international intervention was lost, and described the grave consequences this failure is likely to have for a people intimately familiar with war. Part 2 offered a focused discussion of the factors that led to NATO’s breakdown, and outlined why the resurgent Taliban raises the spectre of a return to protracted war and violence in a post-NATO landscape.

Concluding the series, Part 3 discusses what legacy the war has left for Canada.

The conflict in Afghanistan now has the distinction of being the longest-ever war for both Canada and the United States – longer than the first and second world wars combined. A well-travelled cliché describes Canada’s involvement in the Afghan war by saying that it has “punched above its weight.” Canada took on one of the riskiest assignments of the war: the pacification and stabilization of Kandahar, the spiritual home of the Taliban movement. Seeing some of the heaviest fighting since the Korean War, the Canadian Forces have suffered among the highest per capita casualty rates of the major NATO troop-contributing nations. Because of this bold assignment and our significant aid commitment, Canada has enjoyed a level of status and prestige among its international partners that it has not seen for some time. Canada’s voice matters in Afghanistan, and we have been present at every major decision-making table.

So, what does all this mean for the legacy of Canada’s mission? Canada did a lot of good in Afghanistan, making major contributions to development and security in Kabul and Kandahar. Even the best of intentions, however, could not overcome Afghanistan’s political and security
Miss the previous articles in this series? Check out Part 1 and Part 2.

Canada first intervened in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, which laid bare the reality that a fragile Afghanistan posed a threat to the international community. Al-Qaeda had set up shop in Afghanistan – it had become a sanctuary for a litany of global jihadi groups. In fact, a whole generation of Islamist militants, who would launch attacks in Bali, London, Madrid, and New York, cut their teeth and learned their trade in Afghanistan, first during the anti-Soviet jihad, and later in its training camps. Another collapse of the Afghan state would make Afghanistan an Islamist destination once again.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has already referred to Islamist terrorism as one of the most serious threats facing Canada. Considering the successes of domestic law-enforcement bodies and international intelligence agencies in thwarting attacks and seriously degrading the capabilities of groups like al-Qaeda, including by killing its leader, one could rightfully call this an exaggeration. However, the blowback from a failed Afghanistan mission could, in fact, make the prime minister’s claim accurate.

For Canada, the Afghan mission has already had an enduring impact. First, it gave a significant boost to the image of the Canadian Forces, both within Canada and globally. The Canadian public’s pride in the Canadian Forces, which had waned over the past decade, has now reached new heights. A friendly Conservative government has upgraded the Canadian Forces’ equipment and expanded the resources available to it. The mission has seemingly reinvigorated the force, restoring its morale and fighting spirit after many years of apparent decline.

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