

WHERE'S NATO GOING?

The crisis in financial markets—and the coming budget cuts in many nations—will surely hit the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Britain is slashing its defence budget as are the Americans, the Italians, the Greeks, and even Ottawa, arguably the soundest economy in the West. These cuts will weaken NATO even more, the alliance already reeling after a decade of bumbling incompetence.

Bumbling incompetence: is that too harsh? NATO has been in Afghanistan officially since mid-2003, running the International Security Assistance Force which has been fighting the Taliban and mounting Provincial Reconstruction Teams around the country. But NATO's ability to cajole its members to send troops has been very limited, as Canadians discovered when, after the Manley Report of 2008 called on NATO to put a paltry one thousand troops into Kandahar province to support the hard-pressed Canadian Battle Group, the alliance essentially came up dry. Only the U.S. came through, poor old Uncle Sam once again stepping up to the plate.

Nor were the NATO nations eager to fight anyone in Afghanistan, the Americans, British, and Canadians being almost alone in their willingness to take on the Taliban. The other members sheltered behind caveats—we don't fight at night, they said, or we can't go into the south—and alliance solidarity crumbled, although every nation was happy to get soft billets on the ISAF headquarters staff. It was no edifying spectacle; it remains so.

It wasn't much better when the Libyan intervention began early in 2011. The Gadaffi regime was seen as a soft touch, one that had plenty of muscle available to terrorize its own population, but one that would crumble in a few days under the weight of a NATO air assault. The United States came in heavy, firing off its Cruise missiles, and NATO, led by the British, French, Canadians, and the Nordic nations put up fighter-bombers in substantial numbers. But the Americans quickly withdrew, leaving the job to the alliance members, and the intervention began to peter out. The Libyan rebels could not get their military act together, their politics and policies almost completely murky. And the Gadaffi regime would not fold. The leader might have been mad, but he was no weakling, and he hung on with much support from his army and mercenaries.

NATO will probably prevail in Libya—if prevailing means that some kind of deal will be struck for power-sharing between the rebel fanatics and the Gadaffi loyalists. NATO is unlikely to win in Afghanistan—unless winning is defined as some kind of deal reached eventually between the theocratic Taliban and the corrupt Karzai government. But what this all means is that the North Atlantic alliance will have fought two wars in the first eleven years of the new century and lost—or failed to win—both.

This should be a sharp wake-up call for the Alliance members, the leading democratic states of the world. But there is almost no sign that any of the nations around the table in Brussels cares. Oh, there are studies and reports, new plans and policies, all followed by pledges of action and reform. But nothing really changes, and the financial crises of 2008 and 2011 guarantee that less money will be put up for defence by the alliance members. What it all amounts to is that Washington will be required to do the lion's share of global military action—if the U.S. budget crisis and Republican-Tea Party isolationists will permit this. We're all in trouble.

And where does this leave Canada? Ottawa has been fed up with the way most NATO members hid under the bushes to avoid Afghanistan and Libya while Canadians fought and died. That ought to lead to a serious re-examination of the utility of the alliance, of its worth to us

in the immediate and longer-term future. But NATO contains most of our friends in the world and, while the grumbling among the mandarins and politicians continues, there is unlikely to be any immediate interest in pulling out.

But in diplomacy as in baseball, it's three strikes and you're out. Afghanistan was strike one; Libya was strike two. And strike three? No one yet knows where the next call for action might be—Syria?—but if NATO funks it again, then the pressure from Ottawa and, possibly, Washington may be irresistible. NATO has lasted more than sixty years, but even historic alliances can become so attenuated and powerless that their irrelevance can no longer be ignored.

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