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After Afghanistan failure, NATO should scale back or call it quits

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As [NATO](#) leaders gather in Chicago Sunday, they face two related problems.

The first is the alliance's unmitigated failure to pacify [Afghanistan](#). Don't expect the leaders to admit failure, but that is the reality.

The second, which flows from the Afghanistan debacle, is what to do next. The 63-year-old military alliance still remains an organization without a clear purpose. The Afghan [war](#) represented NATO's attempt to forge a new raison d'être for itself by becoming the world's policeman.

But Afghanistan also demonstrated how little stomach there is for such a role among the populace in NATO's 28 member states.

The alliance was founded in 1949 as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. Western European nations feared that the victorious Red Army, having conquered Nazism in central Europe, might simply continue on to the Atlantic.

As it turned out, those fears were grossly exaggerated. But at the time, they seemed real. More to the point, NATO was politically useful.

For nations like Britain, it was a means to keep the United States engaged in Europe. For the U.S., NATO was a vehicle to fight communism. For Canada, the trans-Atlantic nature of NATO gave this country some manoeuvring room in its relationship with the American colossus.

The collapse of the Soviet Union after 1989 left NATO with nothing to do.

So it floundered around. In 1999, it took a brief turn as Europe's self-appointed enforcer of human rights by bombing Serbia. But even here, member nations were reluctant to involve themselves too much in seemingly endless Balkan conflicts.

The Sept. 11 terror attacks breathed new life into NATO. For the first time in its history, the alliance was being called to come to the aid of a member ostensibly under attack.

Canada and other NATO nations responded by sending troops to join the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. But the real coup occurred when the United Nations (and the U.S.) agreed to let the alliance lead Western troops fighting the Taliban.

At last, NATO had something to do.

The sad story of the Afghan war is well-known. It was ill-conceived and ultimately counterproductive. It has lasted longer than World War II, yet achieved virtually nothing.

As the New York Times reported this week, U.S. officials no longer talk of leaving a coherent, strong, democratic state behind when they and other NATO members pull out the bulk of their troops in 2014.

Instead they talk of leaving behind something "good enough for Afghanistan." By that they mean a nation still divided, still embroiled in civil war — one where the Taliban still controls large swaths of territory.

For NATO, the Afghan War was a stinging reminder of its limitations. Policy elites may have thought that transforming the alliance into the world's policeman was a capital idea. Voters did not.

Alliance expansionists got a brief lift last year when NATO jets helped defeat Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi's comic-opera army. But as post-Gadhafi Libya continues to career into tribal chaos, the verdict is still out on whether that war was really such a good idea.

So what is NATO to do? U.S. President Barack Obama has deliberately shifted America's military focus away from Europe toward Asia and the Pacific. The alliance could follow his lead. But do European nations really want to involve themselves in Asian conflicts? Does Canada?

Perhaps NATO should return to what it was originally supposed to be: a strictly defensive military alliance.

Or, if there's no need for that, perhaps it should gracefully exit the world stage. Sixty-three years is a respectable run.