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Waterloo for NATO

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THE Dutch are debating whether to withdraw their troops from the hot zone of southern Afghanistan and move them to the safer and more comfortable coffee shops of Kabul and northern Afghanistan, where their German, French and Italian fellows-in-arms -- if one can call them that -- from NATO sit out the war.

The configurations of the Dutch debate have come to include Canada and were raised at a meeting of NATO defence ministers in the Netherlands last week. The Dutch fear that if they withdraw from the war zone, where they, along with Canada, the United States and Britain, bear the bulk of the burden of actually fighting the Taliban, that would lead to an abandonment of the war, an effective if unofficial surrender to the terrorists.

The Dutch are probably right. At the NATO meeting that ended Thursday, Germany made it clear that it has no intention of putting its more than 3,000 soldiers in harm's way in Afghanistan; the French offered a few airplanes to help out other NATO allies who have troops on the ground; and the Italians were not to be heard from. The Danes, however, did offer about \$1.5 million to buy video equipment that would enable NATO to document Taliban atrocities and show them on European and North American television screens. Such is the mighty fighting force, the solid alliance that once was NATO.

A Dutch withdrawal would certainly heat up the debate over Canada's role in Afghanistan, already a controversial issue in this country. If it were to happen and no other NATO ally were to step up to take the place of the Dutch, it would create an almost irresistible pressure on the federal government to follow suit.

That would, in itself, be a disaster for Afghanistan and an insult to the sacrifice that Canadian soldiers have made there. It may already, however, portend an even worse disaster in the long run than that -- the end of NATO as an effective military alliance.

For a time after the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO appeared to have lost its bearings -- there was no enemy to fight anymore. But it found its footing again during the Balkan wars when it did what the United Nations would not; when it expanded its membership into the central and eastern European nations; and extended its mandate to a global scale, from Kosovo to the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan. But the lean-on-me part of an alliance -- which is integral to the very nature of NATO -- must be mutual throughout its membership. In Afghanistan it is not, and in the Netherlands last week some of NATO's original and most powerful members, such as Germany, France and Italy, indicated that they don't much care. Under those terms, NATO itself cannot survive. With a Russia resurgent and increasingly bellicose, they may come to regret their apathy in Afghanistan.

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