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Critically Evaluating Canada's Membership in
the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

by Ariel Shapiro
October, 2017

POLICY UPDATE

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A perennial debate in Canadian defence since the Cold War has been whether or not Canada is living up to its commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, a quarter-century since the end of the Cold War, NATO's purpose is far from clear. Despite this, many of those involved in Canadian foreign and defence policy – including governments, opposition parties, academics, think tanks, commentators and the public – frequently question the means of Canadian involvement in NATO, but not the ends. Much of the literature, and certainly most of the media coverage, focuses on Canada's failure to meet its two per cent of GDP defence spending target. Indeed, questions of burden sharing within NATO have taken on a new urgency since Donald Trump's election as president. However, rarely does anyone ask if NATO is good for Canada.

The government's recently published 2017 Defence Policy Review, entitled *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, mentions the term "NATO" over 60 times.¹ The document explains that leading or contributing to NATO efforts is a "core mission" of the Canadian Armed Forces.² It also claims that "NATO provides significant benefits to Canada's security and its global interests,"³ especially because of the deterrence it provides (implying against Russia). However, this statement is never proven; it is simply assumed that membership in NATO is beneficial and important for Canada, and therefore, that Canada should expend significant resources to ensure that it lives up to its NATO commitments. With the exception of J. L. Granatstein's 2013 policy paper,⁴ there have been surprisingly few critical appraisals of Canada's role in NATO from a Canadian perspective.

¹ Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, "Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy," 2017.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴ J. L. Granatstein, *Is NATO Still Necessary for Canada?* (Calgary: Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, 2013), <http://www.cdfai.org/PDF/Is%20NATO%20Still%20Necessary%20for%20Canada.pdf>.



This paper examines these assumptions critically. Without attempting to diminish the importance of Canada's commitment to NATO during the Cold War, this paper will argue that NATO membership has been costlier for Canada than is often realized, both in terms of opportunity cost and real cost; that the benefits of Canadian membership in NATO are overstated; and that continued membership in the alliance poses significant risks for Canada. This essay does not go as far as to advocate withdrawal from the alliance. However, if the trends described below continue, it could be time for Canada to consider stopping "pledging fealty to the increasingly hollow shell of NATO forever."⁵ Furthermore, this essay does not attempt to question or criticize NATO's essential historic role during the Cold War, nor does it advocate a grand change in Canada's foreign policy towards the United States, Europe or Russia. Simply, it approaches NATO from the perspective of *realpolitik* with the belief that a military alliance is a foreign policy tool whose purpose is to further Canada's interests – and perhaps it no longer does this.

Background: Canada and NATO

Canada was one of the 11 founding NATO members in 1949. Since then, the alliance has expanded to include 29 member states, all of which are in Europe, except for Canada and the United States (and half of Turkey). The most important element of the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO's constituting document, is Article 5, which states that an attack against one NATO state should be considered an attack against all, and encourages (but does not obligate) other member states to come to its aid, including by use of force. The existence of Article 5 is (in theory) a powerful form of deterrence, dissuading powerful countries from the temptation of attacking smaller NATO members. Shortly after the formation of NATO, the communist countries of Eastern Europe formed their own collective defence organization, the Warsaw Pact. During the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.



Cold War, NATO benefited the smaller European countries by making it extremely costly for the Soviet Union to invade them, and it benefited the United States by limiting the expansive capacity of its rival, the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War and despite the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO's purpose and structure remain mostly the same, albeit with many new members, mostly in Eastern and Southern Europe. The first and only invocation of Article 5 by NATO members happened after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. There is no official "cost" to membership in the NATO alliance per se. However, in 2014, the leaders of the NATO member states (including then-prime minister Stephen Harper) agreed at the Wales Summit that each NATO member should target two per cent of GDP for defence spending, roughly double Canada's current level.⁶ Recently, United States Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis urged NATO members to meet their two per cent commitments, or else the United States would be forced to "moderate its commitment" to the alliance.⁷

Ending the "Free-Rider" Myth

Any attempt to argue that Canada should examine its NATO involvement critically must first dispel the myth that Canada has been a NATO free-rider, which implies that NATO has been a great deal for Canada. The pernicious free-rider accusation even found its way into the report of the Senate Standing Committee on National Defence, which employed the term "freeloader" and repeated the claim that Canada ranks 23rd out of 28 NATO member countries in terms of defence spending as a percentage of GDP.^{†8}

⁶ "Wales Summit Declaration," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, September 2014,

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm .

⁷ Peter Layton, "The 2 Percent NATO Benchmark is a Red Herring," *The National Interest*, Feb. 16, 2017,

<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-2-percent-nato-benchmark-red-herring-19472> .

⁸ † Note that there are currently 29 members, since Montenegro's accession in 2017. As well, Canada's rank depends on which measurements are used (e.g., current vs. constant dollars), but usually falls in the lower middle of the share of GDP ranking. The most recent NATO numbers suggest Canada is ranked 15th, not 23rd.



The theoretical underpinning of the accusation that Canada is a NATO free-rider is inspired by the work of the renowned economist Mancur Olson, who developed the “exploitation hypothesis”⁹ in the 1960s. Originally intended as a study of the provision of public goods within democratic societies (classic examples include lighthouses and toll-free bridges, which would be under-produced in the absence of government), exploitation theory was adapted to the study of alliances by Olson and Zeckhauser in 1966, who found that in NATO, there is a positive correlation between a country’s overall GDP and the percentage of its GDP it spends on defence.¹⁰ This is due to the powerful incentive for smaller states to free-ride and the negligible reduction in overall defence that occurs when a small state spends a little bit less.

It is commonly assumed that Canada is a free-rider when it comes to defence spending and the NATO alliance. This is the same view adopted by President Donald Trump, who often exhorted NATO allies to pay their fair share while on the campaign trail. The implication of this dominant wisdom for Canada is that NATO has been a good bargain: for the low price of \$19 billion on national defence and the occasional deployment, Canada benefits from the protection of 28 allies and is covered by the American nuclear umbrella. The costs seem to be worth the benefits, and if anything, we are not paying enough.

However, there is another way to study the costs of belonging to the NATO alliance. More recent defence economics suggests that relative to the benefits it receives, Canada has not been a free-rider in the NATO alliance. As Binyam Solomon found in his study of Canadian defence spending in the 1953-2001 period, “the spill-in from NATO is positive and significant, implying Canada is a follower as opposed to a free-rider, a finding consistent with previous results.”¹¹

⁹ Keith Hartley and Todd Sandler, “Economics of Alliances: The Lessons for Collective Action,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 49 (September 2001): 871.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 869.

¹¹ Binyam Solomon, “The Demand for Canadian Defence Expenditures,” *Defence and Peace Economics* 16, no. 3 (January 2005): 188.



Leuprecht and Sokolsky conclude similarly that Canada has been an “easy-rider,” as opposed to a free-rider.¹² This means that generally, as other NATO allies spend more on defence, Canada spends more too, as opposed to reducing its expenditure and free-riding.

The continued focus on this two per cent of GDP target frames much of the debate about Canada and NATO, about why Canada has not met this target, and how it can. This debate is based on the assumption that the two per cent metric is a valid one, and that Canada is thus a NATO free-rider. However, measuring burden sharing in the NATO alliance using share of GDP spent on defence is a deeply flawed heuristic; upon closer examination, we see that Canada, despite not meeting this target, is not a NATO free-rider. If the priority is maintaining two per cent of GDP towards defence spending, a country that suffers a recession (i.e., a reduction in GDP) while maintaining constant defence spending will suddenly increase the percentage of GDP it spends on defence, without any change in overall defence levels.¹³ In fact, after the United States, the NATO country with the highest defence spending in percentage of GDP is Greece. Canada ranks 15th in this measurement, with the latest NATO figures indicating that Canada spends 1.31 per cent of GDP on defence.¹⁴ Thus, looking at share of GDP alone, Canada would be considered a free-rider and Greece would not; this, despite the fact that Canada spends five times what Greece does on defence annually. Furthermore, focusing only on share of GDP provides no indication on how the money is spent; countries that pay above-average military salaries or pensions but underspend on new equipment, for example, might spend more on the military without gaining any extra defence capacity. The original assumption of Olson’s exploitation hypothesis, which predicted that countries like Canada would free-ride, was that defence goods are perfectly substitutable

¹² C. Leuprecht and J. J. Sokolsky, “Defense Policy ‘Walmart Style’: Canadian Lessons In ‘not-so-grand’ Grand Strategy,” *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 544.

¹³ Stephen Saideman, “NATO 2% Myth Busting,” *Saideman’s Semi-Spew*, Feb. 18, 2017, <http://saideman.blogspot.ca/2017/02/nato-2-myth-busting.html>.

¹⁴ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, “Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2010-2017),” June 29, 2017, 3, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_06/20170629_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf.



across an alliance (i.e., that an additional dollar of defence spending by Norway protects Canada just as much as an additional dollar of defence spending by Canada). This is no longer true, if it ever was. The manner in which a country spends on defence, i.e., whether it produces goods that benefit the entire alliance or just itself, matters just as much as the amount spent. The more recent joint product model posits that within an alliance, a member state can allocate its defence expenditure into two different types of goods: defence goods that contribute to the protection of the entire alliance, and defence goods that only benefit that particular member state.¹⁵ Presumably, if each state only produced private defence goods (a common example is search-and-rescue materiel, which does not contribute to the alliance's capacity to deter or defeat an enemy), there would no longer truly be a defensive alliance. Benjamin Zyla offers a compelling list of arguments about why the percentage of GDP metric is flawed and, if numbers such as troop contributions are studied, Canada has not been a NATO free-rider.¹⁶ As Lagassé and Robinson argue, "In short, if one is following a logical defence planning model, determining expenditure in terms of GDP is an exercise in randomness and possible waste."¹⁷ The point is that despite the arbitrariness of the two-per-cent-of-GDP measure, its popularity allows the United States and other countries to consider Canada a free-rider in the alliance, with continued pressure to spend more.

NATO and Opportunity Costs

Even though Canada does not meet its two per cent target, belonging to NATO imposes significant opportunity costs on the country. This means that being a NATO member forces

¹⁵ Keith Hartley and Todd Sandler, "Economics of Alliances: The Lessons for Collective Action," 877.

¹⁶ Benjamin Zyla, "When It Comes to NATO, Canada Is Not a Free Rider," *OpenCanada*, Oct. 1, 2015, <https://www.opencanada.org/features/when-it-comes-to-nato-canada-is-not-a-free-rider/>.

¹⁷ Philippe Lagassé and Paul Robinson, *Reviving Realism in the Canadian Defence Debate*, Martello Papers 34 (Kingston, Ont.: Centre for International Relations, Queen's University, 2008), 60.



Canada to spend more on defence, and spend differently, than it otherwise would if defence planning were based solely on Canadian priorities.

NATO is not a protection racket; while all members of the alliance are encouraged to increase defence spending, there is no mechanism in the short or medium run for punishing a member that does not spend the agreed-upon amount in the form of reducing the provision of defence to that member. The idea of NATO allowing Luxembourg to be conquered by Russia because of its paltry 0.44 per cent defence-to-GDP ratio is absurd and impossible, because avoiding a Russian military presence in the heart of Western Europe is in all of NATO's interest, not just Luxembourg's. This is why the deterrence NATO provides to its members (excluding the United States) can be considered a public good: it is non-excludable, in that the alliance cannot exclude a member from the deterrence it provides by charging a price. Also, it is non-rival, in that deterring Russian aggression or nuclear strikes on one does not reduce the deterrence provided to another. Thus, according to economic theory, each smaller NATO country has an incentive to provide the smallest contribution possible, and deterrence will be under-produced.

The implication of the joint product model discussed above on Canada is that membership in NATO places continued pressure on Canada to allocate its defence spending towards defence goods that benefit the alliance at the expense of defence goods that Canada actually needs. One example of this could be the procurement process around the Canadian Leopard I tank replacement. Michael Byers and Stewart Webb explain how after the end of the Cold War, the Chrétien and Martin governments originally intended to phase out the Canadian Leopard I tank and acquire armoured personnel carriers such as the Stryker, which were both cheaper to maintain and more suitable to post-Cold War operations.¹⁸ However, the decision to deploy Canadian soldiers to Kandahar led the Harper government to scrap the Stryker acquisition and

¹⁸ Michael Byers and Stewart Webb, "Stuck in a Rut: Harper Government Overrides Canadian Army, Insists on Buying Outdated Equipment," (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, September 2013), 7.



opt instead to purchase the far costlier Leopard II tank. This is one example of how participating in the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan led Canada to make a defence acquisition that it likely would not otherwise have made were it not an active NATO member. As the only non-American and non-European NATO member, Canada faces unique defence issues (such as the Arctic) and a lower threat level, and thus suffers the most from this divergence between alliance defence goods and private defence goods. Compared to Norway, Poland or Latvia, for whom defending their borders against the threat of Russian invasion serves their self-defence and alliance interests simultaneously, Canada must procure force-projection capabilities and deploy troops far from home in order to contribute to the alliance's deterrence capacity.

Essentially, while there may not be an official cost per se in continued Canadian participation in NATO, there is indeed a tremendous opportunity cost. This comes in the form of continued pressure to increase defence budgets beyond the levels that are necessary for the defence of Canada, and within present defence spending, pressure to purchase goods that contribute to the deterrence the alliance provides and the defence of Europe, as opposed to goods that only benefit Canada (but that Canada might actually need), such as icebreakers. Furthermore, if Trump credibly threatens to withdraw the United States from the alliance (not an unthinkable eventuality) unless member states meet the two per cent target, these costs to Canada (both real and opportunity) will increase tremendously. In 2013, the Department of National Defence estimated that 77 per cent of all operational and management costs of the CAF were devoted to “international peace, stability and security” (including NATO), leaving only 23 per cent for the defence of Canada and the defence of North America combined.¹⁹ Therefore, it must be concluded that belonging to NATO leads Canada to spend more on defence and spend differently than it otherwise would.

¹⁹ John Alexander, “Canada’s Commitment to NATO: Are We Pulling Our Weight?” *Canadian Military Journal* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 2015): 9.



Benefits of Membership

What benefits does Canada derive from membership in NATO, to justify the costs and opportunity costs explained above? The office of the assistant deputy minister (policy) at the Department of National Defence (DND) argued in 2004 that there are four main reasons for continued Canadian involvement in NATO after the end of the Cold War.²⁰ The first is the “seat at the table” argument, according to which Canada’s membership in NATO grants it “diplomatic access, political influence, and intelligence at a reduced cost compared to that which it would otherwise have to bear.” The second is the “United States” argument, which states that maintaining a positive defence relationship with the United States is an essential priority for Canada, and NATO is a means to do this. The third is the “European argument,” which states that as the only non-European and non-American member of NATO, Canada plays a special balancing role in the alliance and contributes to the defence of Europe. Fourth, there is the “collective defence” argument, according to which Canada’s presence in NATO makes NATO stronger, which makes the world safer by discouraging numerous other potentially destabilizing regional alliances and deterring conflict. This section will evaluate whether these purported benefits truly make Canada safer and more prosperous.

Seat at the Table

Absent any major threat to Canada’s security or vital interests, increasing Canadian international influence has become a foreign policy end in and of itself for both Liberal and Conservative governments. Even during the Cold War in 1989, when the threat to Canada was far greater, Sokolsky still argued that the main benefit from Canada’s alliances was “having a seat at

²⁰ “Audit of NATO Contributions,” (Chief Review Services: Department of National Defence, November 2004): Annex A.



the table.”²¹ There are, however, two ways to criticize this trend. The first is to ask why international influence – a seat at the table – should be considered an end, when in reality, it should be a means of Canadian foreign policy; and second, to ask whether continued membership in NATO produces this international influence for Canada.

Influence over foreign partners, especially NATO allies, ought to be considered a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. An even more extreme version of this “seat at the table” argument is the idea that “national pride and honour” constitute a Canadian interest, necessitating increased military spending and NATO involvement. It was this desire to increase Canada’s profile which contributed to the deployment to the deadly Kandahar province in Afghanistan, as opposed to the less dangerous region of Chagcharan.²² James Eayrs noted in 1965 that “the main and overriding motive for the maintenance of Canadian military establishment since the Second World War has had little to do with our national security as such [...] it has had everything to do with underpinning our diplomatic and negotiating position vis-à-vis various international organizations and other countries.”²³ Leuprecht and Sokolsky similarly question this motivation, arguing,

Yet, recognition, influence, and acceptance are means to assuring security and prosperity, not ends in and of themselves. They are inherently chimerical, transitory, difficult to pin down, and turn into real assets. In a world dominated by super and great powers, where small powers can stir up trouble regardless of whether Canada is at the table or not, how does Ottawa know when its

²¹ Joel J. Sokolsky, “A Seat at the Table: Canada and Its Alliances,” *Armed Forces & Society* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 12.

²² Lagassé and Robinson, *Reviving Realism in the Canadian Defence Debate*, 67.

²³ James Eayrs, “Military Policy and Middle Power: The Canadian Experience,” in *Canada’s Role as a Middle Power*, ed. J. King Gordon (Toronto, Ont.: Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1965), 84.



expeditionary expenditures of treasure—and sometimes blood—are worth the price?²⁴

Faced with limited resources, Canada must consider whether influence is worth the price of admission that NATO entails.

A second critique of this “seat at the table” argument is empirical: over its 68-year membership in NATO, how has Canada truly benefited from this seat? The results are mixed. For example, Lagassé and Robinson note that “the deployment of the Canadian Forces to Kandahar has not prevented controls on the Canada-United States border from being tightened.”²⁵ Leuprecht and Sokolsky add, “It is virtually impossible to establish an actual causal link between any metrics of meaningful global influence and Canadian military contributions to operations overseas. The best that can be said is that Canadian expeditionary deployments have contributed to the peace and security of that of the West, and, therefore, have benefited Canadians.”²⁶ It would be difficult to argue that, compared to non-NATO countries such as Australia, New Zealand or Sweden (who have also experienced a postwar era of peace and prosperity), Canada has benefited tremendously from this membership. There is little reason to believe, for example, that being a NATO member gives Canada a unique ability to talk, ally-to-ally, with the president of Turkey and convince him to embrace liberal democracy. The point is that even if a seat at the table is considered a Canadian interest, there are other ways to obtain this that do not involve NATO. Canada could still participate in peacekeeping missions and join coalitions of the willing, as many non-NATO countries did in Afghanistan and Iraq. Essentially, NATO has not necessarily given Canada this “seat at the table” advantage. Perhaps updating his 1989 “seat at the table” argument, Sokolsky wrote (with Jockel) in 2009: “Even if Canadian influence really could be measured,

²⁴ Leuprecht and Sokolsky, “Defense Policy ‘Walmart Style,’” 546.

²⁵ Lagassé and Robinson, *Reviving Realism in the Canadian Defence Debate*, 2.

²⁶ Leuprecht and Sokolsky, “Defense Policy ‘Walmart Style,’” 546.



though, it would be hard to argue that things would have gone differently in the alliance over the past 60 years had Canada not had its seat at the table, seeing that it supported every major allied decision from reliance on nuclear weapons to fighting in Afghanistan.”²⁷

An interesting contrast to Canada’s membership in NATO is its involvement in the United Nations and occasional quest for a seat on the Security Council. For example, in her recent major address to the House of Commons outlining Canada’s foreign policy orientation, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland explained that one of the reasons Canada is seeking a seat on the UN Security Council is to promote the rights of women and girls around the world.²⁸ This is a clear example of the linking of foreign policy ends with means. However, in the same address, Freeland also proclaimed that “NATO and Article 5 are at the heart of Canada’s national security policy,” but without any similar explanation linking this organization to broader foreign policy goals.

United States

Another, perhaps more convincing, argument for continued Canadian membership in NATO is to maintain strong relations with the United States. It cannot be denied that a strong relationship with our southern neighbour, including a defence relationship, is a vital Canadian interest. Recalling the devastating effect on the Canadian economy of the border closure after Sept. 11, 2001, Canada must continuously convince the United States that it is a secure and willing partner. However, Trump’s election makes it clear that NATO membership is perhaps neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for maintaining this bilateral relationship.

²⁷ Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky, “Canada and NATO: Keeping Ottawa In, Expenses Down, Criticism Out... and the Country Secure,” *International Journal* 64, no. 2 (2009): 317, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40204512> .

²⁸ Chrystia Freeland, “Address by Minister Freeland on Canada’s Foreign Policy Priorities,” *Global Affairs Canada*, June 6, 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html .



For instance, in his analysis of Canada-U.S. relations in the 2003 Iraq War period, Brian Bow finds that the Bush (43) administration was reluctant to use “hard linkages” between coalition participation and border issues.²⁹ This means that there is little evidence that Canada suffered on border or tariff issues due to its decision not to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom; the discovery of mad cow disease in Canadian livestock hurt Canada’s economy much more than the Iraq decision. Bow notes the importance of domestic actors within the United States who benefit tremendously from trade with Canada, and who resist linking military issues to border/trade issues. And surely, any residual ill will towards Canada for the Iraq decision became negligible in 2009 when Barack Obama, who himself had opposed the war, was inaugurated as president. Although the Iraq War was not a NATO mission per se, this example demonstrates that a new approach to Canadian membership in NATO is not certain to have negative consequences on Canada-U.S. trade or the defence relationship.

As well, it is important to remember that Canada and the United States have an established defence relationship that is both older and wider than NATO. The Ogdensburg Agreement of 1940, establishing a defence relationship between Canada and the U.S., predates NATO by nine years. Today, the Permanent Joint Board of Defense and the NORAD relationship between Canadian and American air forces ensures the common defence of the North American continent and maritime warning. It is interesting to note the differences between NATO and NORAD. Whereas NATO requires consensus among all members before initiating a common defence action, NORAD establishes a deep co-ordination and integration of air defences between the two member states.³⁰

²⁹ Brian Bow, *The Politics of Linkage: Power, Interdependence, and Ideas in Canada-US Relations* (Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2009), 151.

³⁰ North American Aerospace Defense Command, “NORAD Agreement,” accessed April 16, 2017.



The United States has a wide hub-and-spoke system of defence agreements with numerous countries that are not in NATO, such as Japan and South Korea; this arrangement could include Canada. After the Cold War, unlike the defence of Norway or Portugal, the defence of Canada against foreign invasion can be considered a core American interest and has been since the Monroe Doctrine and the decline of the British Empire. Canada and the U.S. are also members of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangement along with the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, which has little to do with NATO and would outlast it. The Canada-U.S. defence relationship is more than NATO, and would continue if either Canada or the United States ended its membership in the multilateral alliance. It is even possible that the Canada-U.S. defence relationship could be strengthened if both countries were able to devote more capabilities towards the defence of North America as opposed to foreign deployments.

On this subject, it is essential to read the writing on the wall: America's commitment to NATO is no longer certain. While this is underscored by Trump's election, the causes of this impending change in American defence priorities have deeper roots. Simply looking at the U.S. federal budget, the growth of entitlement spending and the unlikelihood of tax increases indicate that something has to change, and the massive permanent deployment of American personnel to Germany is a likely target. Opposition to military alliances such as NATO is traditionally associated with the far left of American politics, represented by writers such as Noam Chomsky³¹ and Howard Zinn.³² While it is true that a majority of Americans support continued American membership in NATO, it is interesting to note the partisan divide: according to a recent Gallup poll, Republicans, whose opinions are far likelier to shape policy under the current administration

³¹ Zain Raza, "Chomsky: 'NATO Is a Global Intervention Force Run by the US,'" *acTVism Munich*, May 26, 2016, <http://www.actvism.org/en/latest/noam-chomsky-propaganda-und-nato/> .

³² Howard Zinn, "Their Atrocities—and Ours," *HowardZinn.org*, July 2, 1999, <http://www.howardzinn.org/their-atrocities-and-ours/> .



and Congress, were 28 per cent less likely to support American membership in NATO than Democrats.³³

Trump's rhetoric emphasizing "America First," his calls for NATO allies to pay their fair share, and continued questions concerning ties between Trump associates and the Putin regime, demonstrate a presidential world view that is fundamentally different from the one that led successive U.S. administrations to treat the defence of Europe as an American interest. The era of "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty"³⁴ is over. While Trump may claim that NATO is "no longer obsolete,"³⁵ there is no question that America's commitment to the alliance is not as certain as it was in 2016. Questioning sacred cows such as NATO is what helped win Trump the White House. However, Jeet Heer reminds us that there has been a consistent and powerful anti-NATO trend within the Republican Party since the end of the Second World War, in the tradition of the isolationist Truman opponent Senator Robert Taft.³⁶ Andrew Bacevich argued in 2013 that the U.S. should leave the defence of Europe to the Europeans and focus on other priorities.³⁷ Trump has succeeded in shifting the goalposts, forcing future Democratic challengers either to fight an uphill battle to convince Americans of the benefits of globalism, or accept America First as a *fait accompli*. The implication of this change for Canada is that should Canada amend its NATO policy

³³ "Most Americans Support NATO Alliance," *Gallup*, Feb. 17, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/204071/americans-support-nato-alliance.aspx> .

³⁴ John F. Kennedy, "President Kennedy's Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961," *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/JFK-Quotations/Inaugural-Address.aspx> .

³⁵ "Trump Says Nato 'No Longer Obsolete,'" *BBC News*, April 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39585029> .

³⁶ Jeet Heer, "The Republican Roots and Grave Risks of Donald Trump's Hostility to NATO," *The New Republic*, Jan. 18, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/139911/republican-roots-grave-risks-donald-trumps-hostility-nato> .

³⁷ Andrew J. Bacevich, "Time for the United States to Leave NATO," *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/04/23/has-nato-outlived-its-usefulness/time-for-the-united-states-to-leave-nato> .



while maintaining and enhancing its pre-existing and essential North American defence links, Trump might be impressed and inspired – not angry – with this return to defence realism.

Europe and Collective Security

Two final reasons for continued Canadian membership in NATO are the importance of contributing to the defence of Europe, and to collective security generally. As the ADM policy at DND argued in 2004, “Enhancing the effectiveness of NATO will also support Canadian interests by discouraging the formation of smaller security pacts among NATO members.”³⁸ This commitment to Europe and to collective security predates NATO itself – over 100,000 Canadian soldiers perished in the defence of Europe in two devastating world wars. Recalling that sacrifice, does Canada not have a duty to contribute to the long-term peace and stability of the old continent – and is NATO not the best way to achieve this?

There are a number of ways to approach this argument critically. First, we can recognize that Canada’s ability to actually contribute to Europe’s defence is quite limited, and changing this would require a massive investment in defence capabilities unthinkable in peacetime. Lagassé and Robinson agree that “it is important to recognize the very circumscribed role that the Canadian military can play in preserving international stability and protecting the global trade flows.”³⁹ The reality is that NATO’s capacity to deter an aggressor from attacking Europe still depends on the United States. As Elinor Sloan wrote in her analysis of Canada and NATO in Afghanistan, “NATO’s ability to deliver collective security is anchored in American involvement. [...] For Lieutenant-Colonel Hope, who experienced first-hand working within the Alliance at the tactical level, Canada should only take part in NATO out of area combat operations if they are

³⁸ “Audit of NATO Contributions,” Annex A.

³⁹ Lagassé and Robinson, *Reviving Realism in the Canadian Defence Debate*, 101.



supported by US assets.”⁴⁰ The threat of terrorist attacks is more real and deadly to the citizens of Western Europe than a putative Russian invasion; Canada’s deployment to Latvia does not help them.

Second, “Europe” is a vague concept that is by no means synonymous with “democracy.” Both NATO and Europe have changed since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, NATO was more than an alliance of convenience. It survived as long as it did because, unlike Richelieu’s 17th century unholy and temporary alliances with Protestant powers, it was anchored in common values as well as common interests. NATO and Western Europe meant democracy and freedom. Milan Kundera wrote in 1983 about the way citizens in central Europe, behind the Iron Curtain, viewed Western Europe: “For them, the word ‘Europe’ does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word ‘West’.”⁴¹ During the Cold War, the border between East and West, that line “from “Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic,”⁴² was both the part of the world where global hostilities were likely to begin, and a symbol of the side that Canada had picked.

However, this is no longer the case. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO no longer faces an enemy; as Bacevich writes, NATO has succeeded.⁴³ It is difficult to make a case that Canada’s 28 NATO allies are today more worthy of Canadian defence commitments than other countries. Equating NATO with Europe is a faulty heuristic – Sweden, Switzerland, Ireland and Austria are not NATO members, but are certainly European and democratic. East Asia is a likelier powder keg for global conflict than Eastern Europe; if Canada truly wanted to promote collective security

⁴⁰ Elinor Sloan, “Canada and NATO: A Military Assessment,” Strategic Studies Working Group Papers (Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, May 2012), 14.

⁴¹ Milan Kundera, “A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out,” trans. Edmund White, *Granta Magazine*, March 1, 1984, <https://granta.com/a-kidnapped-west-or-culture-bows-out/>.

⁴² Winston S. Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace (‘Iron Curtain Speech’),” *The International Churchill Society*, March 5, 1946, <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/%20>.

⁴³ Bacevich, “Time for the United States to Leave NATO.”



in the spirit of NATO, it would form alliances with democratic Japan and South Korea. As well, it can no longer be claimed that NATO stands for democracy. Why must Canada be bound to defend increasingly authoritarian Turkey? Today, the greater threats to democracy in NATO allies such as Poland and Hungary come not from Russian tanks, but from domestic authoritarianism within those countries themselves. NATO binds Canada to undemocratic allies and saps resources that could be used to help defend partners with whom Canada does share values, or to engage in peacekeeping. Canada can continue to be a force for good, defend small nations against aggressors and stand with select allies around the world. The point is that NATO is not the only way to achieve these goals.

Risks of Membership

In addition to the higher costs and lower benefits of NATO to Canada, as discussed above, there is a third category that merits study: the risks. Essentially, continued membership in NATO risks drawing Canada into conflict, and risks threatening core Canadian interests such as Arctic sovereignty.

NATO and the Arctic

It is well known that global climate change will over time make Arctic waters navigable and Arctic natural resources more accessible. This will continue to have major consequences for Canada and the world. Canadian governments of all parties over the past half-century have stressed the Arctic's importance to Canada; as prime minister, Harper was particularly inclined to promote Arctic sovereignty. Lagassé and Robinson explain Canada's priorities in the Arctic: "Canada's interest here lies in defending its legitimate claims to the islands of the Arctic



archipelago and the surrounding waters, including the North West Passage.”⁴⁴ However, Canada’s Arctic priorities reveal a very awkward situation: the greatest challenge to Canada’s Arctic comes not from Russia, but from Canada’s NATO allies themselves (i.e., the United States, Norway and Denmark). Furthermore, NATO has contributed to securitizing the Arctic and perpetuating a Cold War narrative that turns an economic and environmental situation, for which legal dispute resolution mechanisms exist, into a potential military conflict. During the Cold War, when the threat of Soviet bombers and missiles flying over the Arctic was real and the Northwest Passage was mostly frozen, the trade-off was less salient: it was certainly within Canada’s security interest to allow American submarines free passage in northern waters. Nonetheless, even during this period, significant controversy arose over the passage of American ships into what were claimed to be Canadian waters.⁴⁵ As for today, however, German political scientist Haftendorn quotes a former Norwegian general as using the phrase “a renewed attempt at flogging a dead Soviet horse to get a bigger budget”⁴⁶ to describe NATO’s Arctic mindset.

Membership in NATO makes it extremely difficult for Canada to disaggregate its relationship with Russia. This means that there is pressure from the alliance to prioritize halting Russian expansion into Europe, and thus limiting the possibility of cordial relations between Canada and Russia over Arctic issues which are arguably more important to Canada. In their discussion of the Arctic, Lagassé and Robinson remind us that “Russia has never made any claim to the islands of the Canadian Arctic, nor has there been any suggestion by the current Russian administration, or even any opposition political party in Russia, that Moscow might wish to do so. Realistic threat assessments should identify some semblance of intent when claiming that a

⁴⁴ Lagassé and Robinson, *Reviving Realism in the Canadian Defence Debate*, 65.

⁴⁵ Rob Huebert, “Submarines, Oil Tankers, and Icebreakers: Trying to Understand Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security,” *International Journal* 66, no. 4 (2011): 814, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23104394> .

⁴⁶ Helga Haftendorn, “NATO and the Arctic: Is the Atlantic Alliance a Cold War Relic in a Peaceful Region Now Faced with Non-Military Challenges?,” *European Security* 20, no. 3 (September 2011): 345.



competitor has malicious intent.”⁴⁷

Joël Plouffe and Heather Exner-Pirot are two Canadian analysts who have been very critical of the trend towards the militarization of Arctic issues. They write: “Re-engaging with Russia on Arctic affairs not only makes practical sense, it would strengthen and support Russian moderates working towards greater internationalism. Whatever threat Russia poses to Canada’s Arctic security — and many experts think it’s minimal — engagement is the best option for mitigating it.”⁴⁸ Haftendorn has studied the corrosive effect NATO has had on Arctic co-operation. She notes: “It is remarkable that many Nordic countries continue to see their former conflict with Russia as a main motive for NATO membership, and Russia’s military posture as providing a rational [sic] for their defenses.”⁴⁹ Canada has clashed diplomatically with its NATO allies when the latter attempted to advocate for the defence of free passage in Arctic waters. International law is based strongly on established state practice, and the awkward “agree to disagree” position that Canada has taken with NATO allies on whether or not the Northwest Passage is Canadian could end up hurting Canadian claims. Essentially, NATO pushes Canada into a conflict mindset with Russia, thus making co-operation on the Arctic (a core Canadian interest) more difficult; and it makes Canada complicit in the passage of American vessels into Canadian waters, often done for security reasons, which weakens Canada’s Arctic claims.

The NATO Ball and Chain

A final risk of continued NATO membership that Canada must consider is the possibility of being dragged into conflict. While the ADM (Policy) at DND claims that NATO increases global stability by preventing the formation of smaller alliance blocs, this logic must be re-evaluated in

⁴⁷ Lagassé and Robinson, *Reviving Realism in the Canadian Defence Debate*, 73.

⁴⁸ Joël Plouffe and Heather Exner-Pirot, “Polar Opposites: Time for a 180 Turn in Canada’s Arctic Policy,” *iPolitics*, Dec. 16, 2015, <http://ipolitics.ca/2015/12/16/polar-opposites-time-for-a-180-turn-in-canadas-arctic-policy/>.

⁴⁹ Haftendorn, “NATO and the Arctic,” 345.



the post-Cold War era. We can turn to the international relations theory of alliances in multipolarity, as explained by Kenneth Waltz (and later, Jack Snyder and Thomas Christensen). One of the biggest dangers of a military alliance is “chain-ganging”⁵⁰: that one ally will recklessly drag the others into war, as was the case between Austria-Hungary and Germany in 1914. It is true that the NATO alliance has a mechanism to stop this: Article 5 can only be invoked by consensus, which prevents the shooting down of a Turkish jet by Russia from immediately turning into global war. However, alliance theory argues that it isn’t about automatic triggers, but survival interests. As Waltz explained, in 1914, “If France marched, Russia had to follow; a German victory over France would be a defeat for Russia.”⁵¹ Similarly, if Russia today conventionally invaded a Baltic state and NATO ally, it is difficult to imagine that the alliance would not respond: not for the first time in its history, Canada would be dragged into a faraway, conventional European war. However, Canada can support countries around the world and advocate for their continued survival and independence without being bound to defend them. Canada’s relationship with Israel is a good example. Canada has supported this precariously situated democratic country since its creation in 1948, has engaged in numerous high-level visits and economic agreements with this state, and has frequently (especially since 2006) taken a stand against condemnation of Israel at the United Nations at significant cost to its own reputation. However, there is no defence agreement: should war erupt again between Israel and its neighbours, Canada would not come to Israel’s aid by sending soldiers. A different example is Canada’s relationship with Kuwait. While there is no long-standing mutual relationship of defence and support between the two, it was in the interest of global security to stop Saddam Hussein’s invasion of that country in 1990/1991. Canada answered the call then, but was not bound to support a future mission against Iraq in

⁵⁰ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 140.

⁵¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 141.



2003.

Furthermore, John Mearsheimer argues that NATO expansion has actually exacerbated tensions with Russia, and could lead to the conflict it was designed to prevent.⁵² Drawing on history, he concludes that the possibility of NATO expansion into Ukraine was what led to the Russian annexation of Crimea: “No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow’s mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine.”⁵³ By this telling, NATO expansion – and perhaps even its continued existence – amounted to kicking Russia while it was down, perpetuating the Cold War. Andrew Wolff further explains this view: “Throughout the post-Cold War period, notwithstanding the variable intensity of Russia’s criticism of NATO’s enlargement policy, its central argument has remained fairly consistent: that NATO represents an outdated military bloc and its encroachment in the Russian borderlands is a threat to Russian security.”⁵⁴ One of the many things that distinguishes Vladimir Putin’s Russia from yesterday’s Soviet Union is the lack of any ideology that lends itself to global domination. If Russian tanks crossed into Latvia tomorrow, this would not mean that Berlin, Paris or Nunavut were next. The only reason a regional skirmish, such as Russia’s incursion into Georgia in 2008, would threaten Canada is if NATO responded massively; it would then be expected and even rational for Russia to strike Canada to prevent its contribution to the war effort.

In 1939, it was undoubtedly in Canada’s vital interest to fight for Europe’s freedom: Nazi Germany had the capacity and the desire to fundamentally remake the world in a way that would have been devastating for Canada’s values, prosperity and survival. During the Cold War, when Soviet tanks violently suppressed popular movements in Budapest and Prague, with missiles in

⁵² John. J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (October 2014): 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴ Andrew T. Wolff, “The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (September 2015): 1110.



Cuba, with West Berlin under threat and nuclear submarines patrolling the Arctic, the same could have been said about the Soviet Union: it possessed the will and the capability to challenge the world order on which Canada's survival depended. This is no longer the case in 2017. Russia is a declining regional power with the capacity to cause trouble, but not to truly threaten world stability (the nuclear weapons do mitigate this, but Canada cannot do anything about them anyway). By maintaining a permanent military alliance, ostensibly against Russia, NATO has expanded Canada's interests and risks drawing Canada into a conflict. Re-evaluating Canadian membership in NATO does not mean that Canada would need to switch sides and embrace the Putin regime: absolutely not. Canada could still use all of the tools of statecraft at its disposal to oppose the actions of countries such as Russia that would disturb the peace in Europe, whether or not it was a member of NATO. A permanent military alliance in Europe may not necessarily be the best way to achieve Canada's foreign policy goals, and risks drawing Canada into conflict.

Conclusion

This essay critically examined Canada's current role in the NATO alliance. Without questioning the essential role NATO played in the Cold War and the importance of Canada's contribution to the alliance at that time, more than a quarter-century later it is essential to re-evaluate this alliance and Canada's membership therein in the face of a changing world. This essay began by analyzing the costs of Canada's continued membership in NATO, to argue that they are higher than often realized. It then studied the benefits of Canadian NATO membership, to argue that they are not as significant as the common wisdom accepts. Finally, this essay noted some risks that NATO brings to Canada, in the form of potentially hurting Canada's Arctic claims and interests, and dragging Canada into a conflict it does not need.

This article certainly does not advocate Canadian withdrawal from world affairs, nor does it necessarily advocate withdrawal from NATO. The goal of this article is to encourage further



discussion among academics and policy-makers as to how best to link ends and means in Canadian foreign and defence policy. Treating our membership in a military alliance as an end with intrinsic worth, a grand symbol of Canadian identity, as opposed to a means to further Canada's values and interests, is a mistake. If Canada did decide to withdraw from NATO, it could still be an active participant in peacekeeping missions, come to the defence of embattled democracies, and stand stalwart with the United States against the aggression of another major power. However, these would be decisions made from choice, not out of obligation. If academics and policy-makers agree after careful consideration that NATO membership still makes sense for Canada, then so be it – but the question should still be asked, and asked again.

During the Second World War, then-prime minister Mackenzie King famously said, “conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription.”⁵⁵ This sentiment could be applied to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization: NATO if necessary, but not necessarily NATO. There is a threshold beyond which NATO is too costly, too risky and not beneficial enough to justify continued Canadian membership. It is incumbent upon us to continuously ask ourselves whether or not we have reached that threshold.

⁵⁵ “Mackenzie King’s ‘not Necessarily Conscription’ Policy,” *CBC Digital Archives*, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/mackenzie-kings-not-necessarily-conscription-policy> .



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► **About the Author**

Ariel Shapiro is a Master of Arts candidate at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, specializing in security and defence studies. He has worked at Parliament and as a policy analyst at the federal government, and holds a Bachelor's degree in political science from McGill University.

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