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INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

NATO: A Personal Perspective

by Yves Brodeur
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NATO SERIES

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I left NATO in the summer of 2015 at the end of my mandate as ambassador and permanent representative of Canada to the North Atlantic Council.

Throughout my professional life, I spent 8.5 years dealing directly or indirectly with NATO-related issues; 2.5 years as spokesperson and director of communications at NATO, two years as assistant deputy minister and political director at DFAIT (now Global Affairs Canada) and finally, four years as ambassador and permanent representative.

I had the privilege of being able to observe closely the Alliance's internal travails as it struggled to adapt to post-Cold War and post-September 11 realities. Not an easy task.

In my opinion, if the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Warsaw Pact threw NATO into soul-searching mode, September 11 catapulted the Alliance into a new dimension, a much more complex and challenging one than that for which it was created, prepared and trained.

NATO's involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo sent tremors through the Alliance, foreshadowing the challenges ahead. It marked the end of an era of Manichean simplicity – “us against them” – where the “us” and the “them” were clearly defined.

In many ways, the evolution of the Alliance post-2001 opened up a Pandora's box, bringing to light political tensions within its ranks. The tensions existed before but they were ignored or minimized and remained below the surface of a coasting NATO. Unity against the Soviet threat shielded the Alliance against troubling questions.

The implications were far reaching and underlined a number of challenging issues, many of which have yet to be tackled properly.

More recently, Russia's aggressive actions – annexing Crimea, destabilizing Ukraine and threatening NATO's eastern flank – seriously tested the Alliance's resolve and solidarity. The cracks were real and the debates within Council were long, hard and often inconclusive.

It is not my intention to launch into a deep analysis of the last 15 years but I am concerned by the new dynamic that emerged and its implications for Canada. I would like to offer a few thoughts and questions based on my personal experience representing Canada's interests at the Council table. These are my own views and do not engage my successor nor my illustrious predecessors.

I came back from my four years at NATO convinced that Canada needs the Alliance, particularly at this difficult juncture marked by a worrying political-strategic context. Among them are an aggressive Russia, an assertive China, a chaotic Middle East, a North Africa in disarray, an indecisive and divided EU, intense migratory pressures, expanding terrorism, growing authoritarianism – including in some NATO nations – the unforeseen strategic consequences of climate change and an isolationist America led by an unpredictable president. The list is long and



all are factors supporting the need for a political-military Alliance bringing together nations sharing the ultimate goal of fostering and preserving collective security within and beyond.

My frustration level was also quite high. We need an Alliance but we need an Alliance better suited to face the realities of a fast-changing world. This is not only about the International Secretariat nor only about the secretary general. It is not even about money. It is also about Allied nations and their willingness to bring forward the Alliance in the modern world. Allies, and I include Canada among them, must clarify their expectations as well as restate their belief in shared security goals pursued collectively in the interest of all Allies. They must also reflect upon the balance to be established between national political agendas and collective security.

Here is my list of issues that need to be addressed with resolve in order to enhance the Alliance's efficiency:

- Streamline the decision-making process. It is slow and cumbersome. It is an easily exploitable weakness. Council must delegate tasks to subordinate groupings.
- Growing politicization of strategic debates based on narrow political objectives at the national level should be resisted. It is detrimental to the pursuit of agreed collective strategic objectives.
- The regionalization of issues with complete disregard for collective strategic needs and priorities, especially when resources are scarce, limits NATO's efficiency.
- The emergence of regional political groupings is not helpful as it renders the achievement of consensus very difficult.
- A clear, firm and public declaration of support for all aspects of the Washington Treaty at the political level would dissipate doubts. In particular, NATO cannot and should not remain silent when basic rights it fought to defend are under threat even in member nations. You cannot claim to defend values if you remain silent when they are violated, without eroding your legitimacy (and no, a 13-page communiqué won't do it).
- NATO must increase managerial accountability and transparency, particularly on financial matters. It should align its own practices with nations' best managerial practices. This would greatly speed up the budget approval process and reassure nations that resources are properly managed and accounted for.
- Gender diversity at the senior decision-making level – secretary general, assistant secretaries-general – should be pursued with determination. NATO still projects an all white-male image at a time when even the structure of our national forces is adapting to incorporate all elements of society to reflect growing diversity. The same goes for the military.



- Finally, NATO must be careful in ensuring that the Alliance does not become overly Eurocentric to the point of marginalizing nations outside of the European sphere.

Where does Canada fit in all this? It is not a secret that the Harper government had little time and interest for NATO. The personal relationship between then-prime minister Stephen Harper and then-secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen was not a warm one, to say the least.

A number of back-to-back decisions also cast a long shadow on our role and influence at NATO. Withdrawal from the AWACS consortium, non-participation in the BMD initiative, the end of our mission in Afghanistan, our objection to any discussion on Arctic-related issues and a very tough approach to budgetary issues did not help. Unfortunately, the aggregation of these decisions sent a troubling but unsubstantiated message about our commitment.

Canada was becoming a respected but difficult player who could no longer be taken for granted. Paradoxically, it translated into greater attention paid to Canadian views as well as decreasing popularity for me!

We also found ourselves squeezed between a pushy America wanting to decrease its footprint in Europe and therefore pressuring European Allies and Canada to step up, and an increasingly cohesive European bloc more concerned about its own interests – including every facet of its relationship with Russia – than with the collective security of the Alliance.

To this day, I worry about Canada's role and influence within an Alliance becoming more and more Eurocentric, as I see it. I do subscribe to the notion of a strong Europe and I welcome the determination to create a strong European security identity, but for Canada it inevitably raises the issue of the impact on NATO and on our voice within the Alliance. The celebrated transatlantic link was, is and remains about the United States – perhaps even more so since the beginning of the Trump presidency.

The question remains and is perhaps becoming more acute: where does Canada fit within the Alliance? What are our interests besides undeniable military benefits (interoperability training, etc.)?

We need strong voices at the Council table, including at the political level. But more importantly, we must define precisely and realistically what we want and what we can expect from the Alliance. We need a well-articulated NATO policy. During my time at NATO, I had a very clear sense of what Canada did not want but very little about what Canada wanted.

Finally, it is unsatisfactory for Canada not to be represented at the organization's senior decision-making level. It is not reflective of our steady contribution to the Alliance, financially, politically and militarily since its inception. NATO demands and expects much from Canada but at some point, it must carefully consider what it does for Canada.



I do believe that Canada belongs to the Alliance and that our long association with it has been beneficial to us. But I also believe that the Alliance must take a hard look at itself through the prism of a changing security environment that is more complex than it was in 1949. Canada should do the same if it does not want to become a marginal player at the table.

► About the Author

Yves Brodeur was born in Montréal, and is a graduate of Université Laval in Québec City. He became a member of the Senior Management team of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada in 2003, first as Director General (Communications) and then as Assistant Deputy Minister and Political Director (Afghanistan, International Security). Mr. Brodeur was Ambassador to Turkey from 2005 to 2007 and Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to NATO from 2011 to 2015.

As a professional diplomat since 1982, Mr. Brodeur had a diverse career cumulating high responsibility mandates at the Privy Council Office, Headquarters as well as various Canadian diplomatic missions abroad. He was also Spokesperson and Head of Communications at NATO from 2001 to 2003.

Ambassador Brodeur retired in 2015.

Yves Brodeur est natif de Montréal et a complété ses études universitaires à l'université Laval de Québec. Il a accédé au rang d'ambassadeur en 2005. Il a aussi été membre de l'équipe de haute direction du ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Commerce international du Canada depuis 2003, d'abord à titre de Directeur général (Communications) puis de Sous-ministre adjoint et Directeur politique (Afghanistan, Sécurité internationale).

Diplomate de carrière au service du ministère des Affaires étrangères du Canada depuis 1982, Monsieur Brodeur a eu une carrière très diversifiée cumulant des postes de responsabilité tant au Conseil Privé, à la Centrale qu'à l'étranger au sein des missions diplomatiques du Canada ainsi qu'à l'OTAN dont il a été le porte-parole de 2001 à 2003. Il a été Ambassadeur auprès de la République Turque (2005-2007) et Ambassadeur et Représentant permanent du Canada à l'OTAN (2011-2015).

L'Ambassadeur Brodeur est à la retraite depuis 2015.

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