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by J.L. Granatstein
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POLICY PAPER

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► Executive Summary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been the most successful military alliance of the modern era. Set up in 1949 to counter the Soviet Union, NATO won the Cold War some four decades later without firing a shot.

Perhaps it might have been better if NATO had wound itself up at the end of the Cold War. The alliance instead sought a new role and found it out of area. It conducted operations in Former Yugoslavia, war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and later still an air campaign that brought down Gaddafi in Libya.

None of these operations were notable successes.

In 2011, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that NATO faced “the real possibility [of] a dim, if not dismal future....The military capabilities simply aren’t there.” The transatlantic alliance, Gates said, must confront fundamental strategic questions about its future.

All this makes a hard look at NATO essential. The European nations can readily handle the defence of their territory, and it is time to ask if NATO is the best way for us to contribute to Western defence, to ask which nations can and will act to protect democratic values? The "Anglosphere" states all fought in Afghanistan. So too did France and Denmark. And in Asia, there are other friendly states. There is no talk of a military alliance yet but there is the possibility of coalitions of the willing.

Instead of pledging fealty to NATO's hollow shell, it is time for Canadians to produce a strategy for the next twenty years. Any such review will give primacy to Canada's alliance with the United States. But one question must be asked and answered: does NATO any longer serve our political and military needs?





The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been the most successful and longest-lived military alliance of the modern era. Set up in 1949 to counter the military might of the Soviet Union and Josef Stalin's threat to western Europe's democratic heritage, NATO won the Cold War some four decades later without firing a shot. Yes, there were limited wars fought "out of area" against indigenous Communist forces (aided and abetted by Moscow and Beijing) in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere, but the European and North American homelands of the Alliance members remained inviolate. And almost as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed and dissolved in disarray, all its Warsaw Pact members that could sought entrance into NATO as a pathway to the democratic world. NATO's existence ended in triumph at the beginning of the 1990s.

It didn't end, of course, but perhaps it might have been better if NATO had wound itself up at the end of the Cold War. The alliance instead sought for a new role, a new strategic purpose, and it found it out of area, or outside the boundaries of the alliance. Provoked by ethnic slaughter in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it conducted operations in Former Yugoslavia, involving air attacks against Serbia and the deployment of troops in Kosovo. Then came 9/11 and a long war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, followed later still with an air campaign that brought down the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

None of these operations were notable successes. The alliance was reluctant to engage in Former Yugoslavia, even though Serbian and Croatian ethnic cleansing and slaughters were all too reminiscent of the darkest days of the Second World War. The Afghan War was marked by pro forma contributions from many members, restrictive caveats on the use of troops by many others (including Canada to the end of 2005), and wholehearted support from only a few. It was not good for NATO solidarity to have some nations refusing to let their helicopters be available to help others in extremis, to refuse to fight at night or in snow, and to have a command structure that at times must have resembled nothing so much as a dog's breakfast. The idea of military and financial burden sharing was effectively non-existent, and no one can be surprised that the war, if not yet definitively lost, is well on the way to that lamentable conclusion.¹

Nor was the Libyan campaign, though successful in bringing down the dictatorship, much better handled. Most of the alliance members stayed out of the campaign, some who participated proved themselves unready for combat, and what ought to have been a walkover dragged on, the effort marked by hesitation, problems in command and control, munitions shortages, and political disagreement.² Some victory.

In June 2011, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, stated in Brussels in public what many had privately acknowledged: NATO, the linchpin of European security and transatlantic relations, faced "the real possibility [of] a dim, if not dismal future." The experiences in Afghanistan and Libya pointed to the consequences of chronically underfunded defense establishments, the difficulties in getting NATO's 28 sovereign states to commit resources equitably and predictably, and the speed at which new threats were emerging.

¹ See David Bercuson and J.L. Granatstein, *Lessons Learned? What Canada Should Learn from Afghanistan* (Calgary, 2011).

² On the Libyan operation there are 78 posts (as of 1 January 2013), many of which detail the problems, on CDFAI's The 3Ds blog, www.cdfai.org/the_3Dsblog/



As Secretary Gates said, "while every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission. Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there." This was in effect an affirmation of the military ineffectiveness of the alliance after six decades of existence. The transatlantic alliance, Gates said bluntly, must confront a number of fundamental strategic questions about its future.³ The Secretary, since retired from office, was correct, but nothing substantive has changed since he spoke.

Indeed, matters have worsened. NATO members, including Canada, have begun pulling combat troops out of Afghanistan on their own and not the alliance's timetable, and all, except some as yet undecided number of Americans, are scheduled to depart by 2014. The civil war in Syria, admittedly enormously complex, produced only paralysis and inaction at NATO headquarters in Brussels and in the alliance's capitals. Then there was the global economic crisis that led Europe, the U.S., and Canada to cut back on defence spending. Finally, faced with the increasing power and newly aggressive foreign policy of China, the Obama administration indicated that it was re-balancing its forces, in effect pivoting toward Asia.⁴

The world was changing, and the NATO alliance seemed completely unprepared for this new uncertainty. As Secretary Gates flatly stated,

some two decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the U.S. share of NATO defense spending has now risen to more than 75 percent – at a time when politically painful budget and benefit cuts are being considered at home. The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress... to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense. Nations apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets.⁵

The U.S., in other words, may not be willing to continue to pay NATO's bills much longer. We know Canada won't, and the Europeans do not seem willing to do so. If this unhappy state of affairs continues, NATO may not be long for the world.

All this makes a hard look at NATO essential for Canada. NATO was at the heart of Canadian foreign and defence policy for the entirety of the Cold War (notwithstanding Pierre Trudeau's 1969-70 halving of the Canadian contribution in Europe)⁶, and Europe was Canada's heritage, the locus of Canada's deployments in both World Wars, and a market of importance. But all this has changed. Brian Mulroney's government withdrew all Canadian forces from Europe, and the Harper government has cut back commitments to NATO infrastructure and airborne warning. The military commitment in Europe is all but gone, therefore, a few staff officers and diplomats aside. At the same time, relatively few immigrants now come to Canada from Europe, and much

³ Robert Gates, "The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO)," Brussels, Belgium, Friday, June 10, 2011, www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581

⁴ There is extensive coverage of all these issues in the daily postings on CDFAI's The 3Ds blog.

⁵ Gates, op cit.

⁶ See J.L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy, 1968-84* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 3ff.



of the nation's non-US trade comes from and goes to Asia, a portion that is certain to increase substantially.

Britain, France, Germany, the Low Countries, Italy, and the remainder of the alliance's members – all are friendly nations to which Canada and Canadians have strong ties. But all (or most) are also rich industrialized states that can readily handle the defence of their territory with their own forces and without Canadian – and American – backing. As Robert Gates acknowledged, their economic and fiscal problems are forcing major cuts in personnel, equipment, and capabilities, but those defence reductions are also based on their assessment of the threats they face as Europeans. If they are threatened, they will re-invest; if they are not, they will continue to cut their military budgets. To pretend that Europe cannot now defend itself with its own resources is to deny reality.

In such a situation, surely it is time for Canada at last to ask if NATO is the best way for us to contribute to the fight against terror, to participate – if it chooses – in out of area conflicts, to contribute to countering emerging threats, and to deal with cyberwar.

As we consider this question, we need to remember one particularly salient fact: the Canadian Forces learned in Afghanistan that there was only one NATO partner who could be relied on to support our troops with capable forces, air support, and good intelligence, the United States.⁷ With a long history of worrying about the Americans, Canadians have never liked to be reliant on the U.S. alone – anti-Americanism, after all, is the secular Canadian religion – but that is now the defence reality (as, in truth, it has been for decades), even as the U.S. military is being forced by economic necessity to cut back.

We need to consider where this leads us. Does it not imply a North American and Western Hemisphere focus for Canada? And one with a primary gaze westward across the Pacific where trouble may loom, and only secondarily across the North Atlantic? Once again, the reality is that Europe can defend itself 65 years after the Second World War if it wishes to do so. NATO has served us well, but at the very least we need to consider if it serves us still. After serious consideration and analysis, the answer might be that it does; the question nonetheless needs to be raised and seriously considered.

But if not NATO, what? Which are the nations that have demonstrated that they can and will fight to protect the democratic values and the national interests that they share? The United States, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, the Anglosphere, in effect, all fought in Afghanistan. So too did France (which led the way in Libya) and Denmark. And in Asia, their territory and interests increasingly threatened by China's ambitions, there is South Korea, Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, and possibly India. There is as yet no talk of a military or political alliance built around these nations in and with interests in the Pacific, but there is at the very least the possibility of coalitions of the willing when and if necessary.⁸

I recognize that Europe is our heritage (for most of us today, but not for long); I know Canada has had and still has national interests there; I know NATO won the Cold War, and we owe it

⁷ Bercuson and Granatstein, *passim*.

⁸ See James Boutillier, "Can NATO Find a Role for Itself Vis-a-Vis China?" *NATO Research Paper #87* (December 2012). Boutillier points to the problems more than the possibilities.



much. But Afghanistan should have taught us a hard lesson: if we can only rely on the U.S., why pretend otherwise?

We are providers of security to NATO but, as some Canadians understood, even if they only rarely said so, the NATO commitment to provide security to Canada scarcely existed. Canada had committed itself to defend its overseas partners, and it stationed troops, aircraft, and deployed most of its navy to do so. The bills for this long-lived deployment were high, and they were never very popular with Canadian governments and taxpayers. Europe's reciprocal commitment to defend North America, on the other hand, scarcely existed as anything more than an unlikely hypothetical promise. To be sure, the main Soviet military threat was directed at Europe, and the USSR's bombers that were poised to attack North America were faced by NORAD, a U.S.-Canada organization that was limited to the two nations by their deliberate choice. After 9/11, certainly NATO invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty because the United States was attacked (the idea of doing so being raised initially by the Canadian Ambassador to the alliance), but that was the United States. Only a Canadian would think to ask if Article V would have been put into effect if terrorists had attacked Montreal or Halifax rather than New York and Washington. Maybe so, but no one could argue with certainty that this would have occurred. The U.S. would certainly have reacted to help defend Canada, but NATO might not have budged. I suspect it would not have done anything other than to express its regret and solidarity.

NATO's one-way street still matters. Everyone hopes that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea will determine, regulate, and control sovereignty and development in the Arctic. But the UN has often been a weak reed, and some believe that the Arctic may become a theatre of conflict as the ice melts, the shipping of oil and iron ore increases on the shorter Polar route between Europe and Asia, and hitherto unreachable resources become more open to exploration and exploitation. We need to ask if Canada could count on the assistance of its alliance friends in the Arctic if military assistance should ever become necessary against a newly aggressive Russia. President Putin's nation has interests in the north and will seek to control resources there; so too will Beijing, perhaps even more aggressively, as it seeks to secure raw materials wherever they are. But in 2013, there are additional major contenders for influence and control in the Arctic Ocean – the Americans and the countries of the European Union, our friends in NATO. How could anyone assume that NATO would stand by Canada in any future struggle in the Canadian north? What is more likely is that a frantic scramble for control will pit each against all, company against company, nation against nation. And in such a scramble, who can argue convincingly that Canada might not be the loser? National interests are always more important than friendships, after all, and some very powerful nations have their eyes on the Arctic's resources.⁹

In other words, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization does very little or nothing to protect us at home and has proven its limited effectiveness on operations. The United States, by contrast does protect us in its own interest and is effective, still far and away the possessor of the most effective military force on earth. Instead of pledging fealty to the increasingly hollow shell of NATO forever, perhaps it is time for Canadians after 64 years in the alliance to begin a fundamental reassessment of their place in the world and at last to produce a hard-eyed, hard-edged national security strategy for Canada. What we need is an analysis of Canada's defence

⁹ There is substantial literature on Arctic developments. See Rob Huebert, *The Newly Emerging Arctic Security Environment* (Calgary, 2010), and the many posts on the CDFAI's The 3Ds blog.



and foreign policy requirements, a sweeping review of where our interests lie today and where they will need to be protected in the next twenty or fifty years. Any such review will surely continue to give primacy to Canada's alliance with the United States. But one question that must be asked and answered is if NATO any longer serves our political and military needs.

If such an analysis says strongly that we still need NATO to protect our national interests, I will be content. But Canadians and their government must ask the question for the first time since Prime Minister Trudeau raised it at the end of the 1960s. Then, the answer was that NATO remained necessary – but not so much so that the Canadian commitment could not be cut by half. Today, the answer might be that NATO has served its purpose well in the past but is now no longer needed as we head into a new world with its very different challenges. It is time to raise the question for consideration.

► About the Author

Jack Lawrence Granatstein was born in Toronto on 21 May 1939. He attended Toronto public schools, Le Collège militaire royal de St-Jean (Grad. Dipl., 1959), the Royal Military College, Kingston (B.A., 1961), the University of Toronto (M.A., 1962), and Duke University (Ph.D., 1966). He served in the Canadian Army (1956-66), then joined the History Department at York University, Toronto (1966-95) where, after taking early retirement, he is Distinguished Research Professor of History Emeritus. Granatstein has also taught at the University of Western Ontario and the Royal Military College. He was the Rowell Jackman Fellow at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (1996-2000) and was a member of the Royal Military College of Canada Board of Governors (1997-2005). From 1 July 1998 to 30 June 2000, he was the Director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. He was then Special Adviser to the Director of the Museum (2000-01), a member of the Canadian War Museum Committee (2001-06), and chair of the Museum's Advisory Council (2001-06). He is now a member of the Board of Trustees of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (2006-), a member of its Executive and Development Committees (2009-), and is chair of the Board's Canadian War Museum Advisory Committee (2007-). The government re-appointed him to the Board of Trustees for a second three-year term.

Granatstein has been an Officer of the Order of Canada since 1996. He held the Canada Council's Killam senior fellowship twice (1982-84, 1991-93), was the editor of the *Canadian Historical Review* (1981-84), and was a founder of the Organization for the History of Canada which gave him its first National History Award in 2006. He has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada since 1982 and in 1992 was awarded the Society's J.B. Tyrrell Historical Gold Medal "for outstanding work in the history of Canada." His book, *The Generals* (1993), won the J.W. Dafoe Prize and the UBC Medal for Canadian Biography. Canada's National History Society named him the winner of the Pierre Berton Award for popular history (2004), and the Canadian Authors Association gave him its Lela Common Award for Canadian History in 2006. In 2008, the Conference of Defence Associations awarded him its 75th Anniversary Book Prize as "the author deemed to have made the most significant positive contribution to the general public's understanding of Canadian foreign policy, national security and defence during the past quarter century."

He has honorary doctorates from Memorial University of Newfoundland (1993), the University of Calgary (1994), Ryerson Polytechnic University (1999), the University of Western Ontario (2000), McMaster University (2000), Niagara University (2004), and the Royal Military College of Canada (2007). He is a senior Fellow of Massey College, Toronto (2000-). The Conference of Defence Associations Institute presented him the Vimy Award "for achievement and effort in the field of Canadian defence and security" (1996), and he was a Director of the CDAI and a member of its Executive Committee (2005-09). In 2007, he received the General Sir Arthur Currie Award from the Military Museums Society of Calgary, and he was named honorary historian of the Royal Canadian Military Institute.

In 1995 he served as one of three commissioners on the Special Commission on the Restructuring of the [Canadian Forces] Reserves (chaired by the Rt. Hon. Brian Dickson, former

Chief Justice of Canada), and in 1997 he advised the Minister of National Defence on the future of the Canadian Forces. He was a member of the Advisory Committee of the Dominion Institute, is a national fellow of the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies (1997-), is on the Research Advisory Board of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (2010-), and was Chair of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century (2001-5) for which he wrote a monthly column (2006-07). He is a Senior Research Fellow (2008-) and was a Board of Directors member (2004-10) and Chair of the Advisory Council of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (2001-08). He writes a monthly newspaper column for CDFAI (2008-).

Granatstein writes on 20th Century Canadian national history--the military, defence and foreign policy, Canadian-American relations, the public service, and politics. He comments regularly on historical questions, defence, and public affairs in the press and on radio and television; he provided the historical commentary for CBC-TV's coverage of the 50th, 60th, and 65th anniversaries of D-Day (1994, 2004, 2009), V-E Day (1995, 2005), V-J Day (1995), and the 90th anniversary of Vimy Ridge (2007); and he speaks frequently here and abroad. He has been a historical consultant on many films, including "Canada's War" (Yap Films, 2004), and he wrote for the National Film Board's projects to put Canadian Great and Second World War film footage on-line. He wrote a regular book review column for Legion magazine (2006-09) and for On Track (2006-08), and he was the historical consultant for the Ontario Veterans Memorial (2005-06) and the Gardiner Museum's Battle of Britain exhibit (2006).



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