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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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With a groundswell of conflicts engulfing the world, it is easy for Canadians to assume our geographical location will render us immune. Although the concept of splendid isolation might have served the British Empire well after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, its legitimate application to Canada's national security strategy today is limited. As events like the savage murder of Jamal Khashoggi or America's abandonment of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty have confirmed, today's security landscape is a shattered version of its former self. National threats are no longer bound by distance or rules. Furthermore, the ongoing diminishment of multilateralism and gradual erosion of an international rules-based order are shifting toward a setting of resurgent state actors competing for dwindling strategic spaces. This fierce competition has injected new levels of potential escalation at contested areas with actors eager to project hubris through their awesome arsenals. When combining these features with the proliferation of advanced weaponized technology, today's global security environment offers a dearth of predictability and stability. Against this backdrop, Canadians would do well to take stock of the outcomes of the recent Warsaw Security Forum (WSF). With such a concentration of thematic experts and authorities at the WSF, there are many lessons to be observed when assessing Canada's future national security strategy and priorities.

As the leading conference in Central and Eastern Europe on matters pertaining to security and military affairs, as well as transatlantic co-operation, the WSF is one of the premier gatherings of its type. Now in its fifth year, the 2018 edition did not disappoint. With over 1,200 participants, including 20 ministerial-level delegations, engaged in 50 conference sessions on all aspects of international security, the results of these discussions and debates were sorely needed in the search for a strategy to guarantee a safer future. The status of the conference also mirrors the country - Poland has become modern and influential. Like the skyline of Warsaw that is scattered with a plethora of skyscrapers which have swallowed the residual elements of the communist era like the Palace of Culture, the WSF reflects the prominence of Poland's newfound input on both European and Euro-Atlantic issues. In addition, the WSF also served to celebrate the close bilateral relations with neighbouring Lithuania, who remains stolid against Russia's aggression on NATO's eastern front.

In anticipation of the 2018 WSF, the Polish government made waves in the fall for introducing the idea of stationing a permanent American military presence on its territory. The so-called "Fort Trump" - much to the satisfaction of the current American president - was received with mixed reviews. In addition to many members of NATO questioning its utility, Russia complained that it was a clear violation of the 1997 *NATO-Russia Founding Act*. After two intense days of plenary sessions, breakout sessions, side conversations and night-owl sessions, two major outcomes materialized with a collection of secondary issues to watch.

Above all, the return and acceptance of a great power dynamic to the international system emerged as the driving issue of the conference. After a decade of state preoccupation about defending against radicalized non-state actors engaging in terrorist activity, the calculus of national security policy-makers has changed. Since 2014, the use of force to change borders in



Europe or the artificial terraforming of islands in Asia has extinguished any debate as to the new international pacing threats. The impact of this systemic transformation has reverberated throughout capitals, dramatically influencing national policy in the global commons regarding arms procurement as well as personnel recruitment. Unsurprisingly, both Russia and China dominated the conversation, but for divergent reasons.

While the Cold War might be over, there is little reason to believe that the West is no longer engaged in an ideological struggle with Moscow. Today, the exportation of corruption has replaced communism as the chief ideological element the Kremlin disseminates as it continues to behave like a nationalized mafia. In this 21st century battle of values, Kyiv has overtaken Berlin as the epicentre of struggle. Furthermore, prominent figures like former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and former Austrian finance minister Hans Jörg Schelling act as Russian surrogates through their work at Gazprom, tempting the resolve of law-abiding and reform-minded Europeans. The recent mega-scandal involving Denmark's biggest bank, Danske Bank, and its Estonian branch admitting to [money-laundering](#) €200 billion out of Russia is proof of this practice. This feature plays into President Vladimir Putin's greater strategy to erode the legitimacy of rules by infecting Western banks and institutions with ill-gotten gains. If the question of whether the West is at war in one way or another with Russia was ever in dispute, former Russia State Duma member Ilya Ponomarev, the only member not to vote in favour of annexing Crimea, resoundingly confirmed this war footing. He pleaded with the audience and its leaders to snap out of our complacency. The recent execution of NATO's exercise Trident Juncture 2018 (TRJE18), and deployment of 50,000 troops from 31 NATO and partner countries was a timely message demonstrating unity and deterrence. Canada continues to contribute to this process and to the Alliance by [sending](#) a contingency of approximately 2,000 personnel to TRJE18.

Although less visible and blunt in action, Beijing's global aspiration for influence was no less a cause for Western concern, according to experts at the WSF. Unlike Russia, which is working to redefine the international system and replace it with a model grounded on reserved spheres of influences akin to a Yalta 2.0, China sees merit in maintaining the current system. Its paramount rise over the last decades lends credence to Beijing's assessment and policy choices. Instead, it was argued that President Xi Jinping would prefer to continue China's ad hoc participation in the rules-based system and engage within it only when it serves the national interest. Similar to Russia, China has also chosen to inject impotency into the rules-based order by adopting tainted and suspect institutional practices. Its use of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a vehicle to degrade international lending standards is a prime example of this initiative. With the bank lowering its lending threshold to attract debtors, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has in turn been forced to respond by doing the same to keep pace. The participation of Western institutions in the race to the bottom is the exact outcome coveted by Beijing, which hopes to blur the line between liberal democracies and autocratic regimes. In the most alarming of statements at the WSF, retired Lt.-Gen. Ben Hodges, former commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, [speculated](#) that based on the worsening relations between China and America, war in the future was not to be discounted: "The United States needs a very strong European pillar. I think in 15 years — it's not inevitable — but it is a very strong likelihood that we will be at war with China."



His comments came with his call for European allies to assume more responsibility to combat a revanchist Russia due to America's renewed attention on defending its interests in the Pacific.

A noteworthy observation out of the WSF was the constantly evolving status of relations between Moscow and Beijing. While many Sino-Russian experts assess this relationship as a product of convenience that continues to blossom, a more nuanced appraisal produces an alternative perspective. Consider that at the most recent Vostok exercises, the exclusive Russian naval segment in the Pacific was shadowed at a distance by a Chinese-flagged intelligence-gathering ship. Based on the longstanding suspiciousness of each capital's motives, it would be naive to categorize this incident as isolated. As their interaction will continue to be marked by a veneer of trust, NATO can gain much advantage from their unity, albeit not perfect, in the event of a crisis.



Figure 1: A map illustrating the proposed route of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Northwest Russia to Northeast Germany. (Source: The Guardian)

The second major outcome was NATO's precarious state. Former secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen captured this sentiment by declaring that "NATO seems to be militarily strengthened, but politically weakened." The latter was especially concerning given that Russia would aggressively pursue any perceived political vulnerability to divide the Alliance. The fulcrum of the Kremlin's strategy to divide members is today organized around the highly controversial Nord Stream 2 gas project. Despite repeated warnings from many Central and Nordic European states for Germany to reconsider its decision to greenlight the project, there seems to be little [appetite](#)



among the political establishment in Berlin to abandon it. While it was argued that its implementation would contradict the EU's Third Energy Package and even potentially result in sanctions from the U.S. Congress, a greater issue at stake is a litmus test of how Germany intends to treat its EU and NATO partners. With German Chancellor Angela Merkel set to stand down in 2021, an amicable resolution to this dispute is unlikely, thus sowing more internal division among NATO and EU members.

A natural extension of this energy security quagmire is the West's relationship with Ukraine. If Nord Stream 2 is implemented, Ukraine has more to lose than any other country. According to 2017 figures, the current transit fees that Ukraine receives for connecting Russian gas to Europe are equivalent to the Ministry of Defence's budget of US\$3 billion. Compounding the depletion of funds are the years of broken promises and [slow reforms](#) by the Poroshenko government that have tested Western political patience. Combined with the Kremlin's ability to ramp up conflict intensity in the east and use the country as a Petri dish for cyber-attacks, Russia is betting that "Ukraine fatigue" will eventually lead to the West abandoning its commitment to the country. With upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections set to take place in 2019 and the [Russian blockade](#) in the Sea of Azov, the chances of future progress in Ukraine remain stalled.

Against the backdrop of these outcomes, Canada should look to integrate the lessons learned from the WSF to bolster its security and those of its allies. In the tussle of great powers, Canada's position has never been to tilt the balance of power. Instead, it should continue to assume an oversized complementary role and contribute to policies that fit Canadians' strength and military competencies. The extension of Canada's mission in NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) in Latvia until 2023 as well as its "train the trainer" mission in Iraq are signs of this acute alignment of policy and capabilities. Furthermore, Canada has shown its willingness to engage in a potential flashpoint area by expanding the CAF's footprint in Central and Eastern Europe. The deployment of CAF personnel at the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin, Poland and the Multinational Division Northeast Headquarters in Elbląg, Poland, as well as at the Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence Centre in Vyškov, Czechia, confirm Canada's unwavering commitment to defend NATO allies. Even more room to expand its presence is feasible at the NATO Force Integration Unit in Bratislava, Slovakia. The sum of these deployments will not only add valuable experience to CAF personnel, but more critically will foster political and military relationships with the host nations. This by extension contributes to Alliance unity and reinforces political cohesion, an imperative that Rasmussen echoed.

Whenever possible, Ottawa must support Kyiv to further its democratic ambitions and self-protection. Initiatives like the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Program or Operation UNIFIER, which have [trained](#) more than 8,760 Ukrainian soldiers, are testaments to this political fraternity that must continue. When it comes to pressuring Russia, Canada could choose to enforce the *Magnitsky Act* or bring greater international visibility to the plight of 93 Ukrainian political prisoners held in Russia and in occupied Crimea. However, due to the sensitive nature of Nord Stream 2 as a predominantly European issue, Canada should keep its distance when choosing to insert itself and yield to the European Commission's Directorate-General for Energy. Any foreign



and unnecessary involvement in continental matters is likely to be poorly received in Berlin and might inadvertently advance the project, especially with the advent of a new chancellor.

With China's [economy cooling](#) amid a trade war with America, Canada must resist the temptation to closer ally itself with China to resolve its own trade disagreements. Despite the legitimate grievance Ottawa has regarding farcical steel and aluminum quotas, Beijing is looking to exploit this frustration. Consequently, allying with China in terms of trade practices promotion against America would be short-sighted and hurt Canada in the long run. As a viable alternative, Canada's [invitation](#) to 12 like-minded trading partners to review the current state of international trade to spark reform and build consensus for maintaining respect for rules-based trade must be persistently pursued. Finally, to combat the free flow of illicit funds into Canadian financial institutions, the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada (FINTRAC) must remain vigilant in overseeing and reviewing suspicious transactions involving national institutions. As the Danske Bank case confirmed, even the most respectable of institutions can fall victim to greed. Possible areas in which to build deterrence include applying corporate fines for FINTRAC violations as a set percentage of earnings and criminally prosecuting upper management aggressively.

When surveying the global landscape of threats, Canadians would do well to anchor their perception of security based on the wisdom of NATO's former deputy supreme allied commander Europe, Richard Shirreff. When discussing the fragility of peace at a plenary WSF session, he remarked with surprise that people assume the default setting of the international system is peace. The litany of current conflict episodes around the world has resoundingly disproved this assumption. Underlining this is that while Canada might be blessed with a certain level of isolation, its citizens cannot continue to take their security for granted. As the WSF has confirmed, the next conflict could be found around the corner and materialize out of nothing. Splendid isolation will help but not prevent compromised security. To ensure prolonged stability and prosperity, Canadians and the government must continue to work at this process and aid those who need it most. Although uncomfortable to fathom and by no means imminent, one day it could be us calling out for help.

► About the Author

Roger Hilton is a Non-Resident Academic Fellow at the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University, Deputy Secretary-General of the Youth Atlantic Treaty Association (YATA) and Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He is a 2016 graduate of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna and holds a Masters Degree in Advanced International Studies, as well as a 2013 foreign policy certificate from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Roger has previous experience with the delegation of the Kingdom of Belgium at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In addition, he has worked at the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Tbilisi, as well as the Estonian Atlantic Treaty Association in Tallinn. He was a member of the 2016 Riga Conference Future Leader Forum. Roger's research focuses on transatlantic affairs and the post-Soviet Sphere, where his work has been featured in the Center for International Maritime Security, Review of European & Transatlantic Affairs, and Atlantic Voices. To date he has visited half of the former Soviet Republics including the breakaway region of Transnistria as well the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

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