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Don't Overburden or Undervalue NATO

A Policy Update Paper

By

Alexander Moens, PhD

CDFAI Fellow

and

Simon Fraser University

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Moens is a professor of Political Science at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, and a Senior Fellow at the Fraser Institute in the Centre for Canadian-American Relations. He teaches American Politics and Foreign Policy and Security and Defence Relations in North America and NATO. Moens served in the Policy Planning Staff of Canada's Foreign Affairs Department in 1992 and was a visiting fellow at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. in 1999. He is also a researcher with the Council For Canadian Security in the 21st Century, and a Fellow of the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute.

NATO has launched a review of its long-term *raison d'être*. By next fall it wants to post a new Alliance Strategic Concept to explain to its members, and the rest of the world, what NATO is for and why. This document is meant to guide how and where NATO will act in the future and assist allies in preparing for common action on such threats.

Canada has always had a crucial stake in NATO. In 2009 Canada's interests in NATO's future are quite different, but still as important as they were in 1949. Back then, Canada alongside the United States and Britain was instrumental in creating the Atlantic Alliance. The allies needed a new vehicle because the stalemate in the UN Security Council would prevent them from acting in the defence of Europe. The stated goal of the Alliance was the defence of the territory of its members. The Soviet threat was not mentioned by name.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Canada was strongly in favour of redirecting the Alliance's focus towards securing stability and democratic development in all of Europe. The 1991 Alliance Strategic Concept and its 1999 revision made those goals explicit. Canada played an active military and diplomatic role in bringing peace and stability to the Balkans. On September 12, 2001, the Alliance for the first time invoked its common defence clause and set the stage for its current global engagement. Again, Canadians have worked hard to bring security and redevelopment to Afghanistan.

The current quest for a new Alliance strategy is, in part, about catching up to where we are today, but mostly about setting a broad mandate for the future. As always there are many visions and divisions within the Alliance. Some seek to make it a global transoceanic league, others want to shrink it back to only defending the home territory of its members; some want to expand the definition of allied security to humanitarian intervention and conflicts over food, water, migration, climate change, and energy security.

The debate about NATO in Canada has never been prominent. We know that Canadian opinion is split on our continuing efforts in bringing security to Afghanistan, but beyond that Canadians do not think much about NATO. There are calls by policy advocates and pundits for Canada to abandon its strong military role in NATO and to take on a soft-power foreign policy that puts multilateral diplomacy, reconstruction, and development at the front.

Rather than redirecting Canadian resources away from hard power, it is now time for Canada to articulate its own interests in the future development of NATO. By our recent sacrifice in lives and treasure in Afghanistan, and by rising to the top-tier of the fighting allies in NATO, Canada has a well-earned platform to make its case for NATO's future.

Why is NATO still important to Canada? Simply put, we still rely on forward-based defence. We need to act against threats to our democratic values, our global trade interests, and the secure flow of people in areas far away from Canada's shore. The alternative to a functioning NATO for Canada is reliance on a far less capable United Nations, or a narrow alliance with the United States, or no capacity to act at all.

Given this crucial forward-based defence function, Canada should avoid both overburdening and undervaluing NATO. Concerning overburdening, Canada must lobby against creating the expectation that NATO will become a type of global policeman. There is not enough solidarity among NATO nations, with national interests and military capabilities still differing a great deal. If NATO were to become the main instrument for humanitarian action, or the right to protect, or to deal with conflicts caused by migration or climate change, it would crumble under the weight of disagreement and infighting among its members.

But there is an equal danger in undervaluing the Alliance. It needs a clear and simple rationale that binds the allies. The core value of NATO remains twofold. First, the Alliance still has an 'old' problem and that is illiberal Russia. Moscow does not need to be isolated or contained, but rather engaged; however, it must be engaged from a position of firm democratic resolve backed by hard power. The European Union does not have this power. NATO is needed to give Eastern European members confidence to pursue an independent foreign policy.

Secondly, NATO must articulate its solidarity around a long-term threat faced by all of its members in greater or lesser degree. NATO faces an existentialist threat against the values of its members, including the rule of law, individual freedom, freedom of religion, and respect for human rights.

The existentialist threat to all of our liberal societies comes in the form of a fanatical ideology that is willing to use all levels of armed violence to make its points. NATO must deter against the violent and armed growth of this ideology and, if necessary, provide a forward-based military defence.

Canadian values, our global trade interests, and the security of the flow of immigrants to Canada, all dictate that we should take an active part in reducing this long-term threat.

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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