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NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept and Canada's Vital Interests

For Canada, NATO is not an international organization of choice but of necessity as it serves vital Canadian interests. Specifically, it is the only effective multilateral vehicle through which to launch forward-based defence actions and to act effectively in overcoming international security threats to Canada and its democratic allies. It is also crucial to Canada politically because it binds together North American and European commitments about what constitutes world stability and democratic principles. This binding is not always strong as we saw during the 2003 Iraq war, but it is stronger and more coherent in action than any other bond, including the UN, the G-8, or the EU plus friends. It continued beyond the Cold War and the Balkan crises to today's attempts to re-build Afghanistan (and increasingly Pakistan).

Without NATO, Canada would, in pursuit of these vital interests, fall back on either a hodge-podge of international soft power instruments, a narrower alliance with the United States, or self-help and moralist isolationism.

By its recent sacrifice in lives and treasure and by rising to the top-tier of the fighting allies in NATO, Canada has secured for itself a large stake not only in how NATO will fare in Afghanistan, but also in how it should reform, including the definition of Article V operations, future membership, how it interacts with other organizations including the EU and non-European democracies, and how it operates internally. It is lamentable that so little public discussion takes place in Canada about our interests in NATO reform and that most political arguments in Canada focus on foreign policy options that largely ignore Canada's work in NATO.

Threats and NATO Responses

Russia's recent adamant rejection of liberal government and its search for like-minded international friends has put it again at odds with Western democracies. Illiberal Russia is not trying to foment revolutions or invade the West, but it is trying to secure a ring of Border States that must say farewell to their democratic aspirations, and take their direction solely from Moscow. Some allies such as Germany are assessing their options in terms of how much to accommodate a resurgent Russia versus aligning with a diluted NATO for both strategic and economic reasons. In contrast, most of the thirteen Central and East European

members of NATO who have joined since 1997 are clamouring for a modern version of the original NATO in which the common defence (Article V) function rather than far-away operations dominate defence policy and planning. They want NATO training and installations in Eastern Europe. NATO's ambiguity about its traditional counterbalance role to Russia in Europe and its forward-based defence role globally could erode West European solidarity and hinder Eastern European progress. Canada has a role alongside the United States in mediating the relationship between Old and New Europe and in providing for the emerging democracies a transatlantic military security link that complements the EU efforts at economic and democratic transformation. If we consider the future of Ukraine, for example, Canada's role in NATO's original task is not finished. At the same time, NATO's diplomatic ties with Russia should be deepened for NATO's new mission towards Russia is neither containment nor isolation but democratization.

Fanatical and militant Islamism is not a monolith in terms of organization, but it is an emerging totalitarian ideology which seeks state support and state conquest to secure technical, financial and popular support to widen its ambition. Its goal is completely counter to all of NATO's interests and values. Totalitarian religion in this sense forms an existentialist threat to all NATO members. The ASC need not mention Islamism by name as it never mentioned Soviet communism by name while still formulating an expected solidarity around such a threat. Regardless of all the other means used by democratic states, international organizations, and non-governmental agencies to moderate or undo this threat, NATO must be able and ready to use military means when such is the only vehicle left to ensure that no significant or organized resources are controlled by this threat or that no organized plan of attack on NATO members and other democracies can proceed. The Alliance Strategic Concept should expand the interpretation of NATO's Article V obligation in terms that would clearly include defence and deterrence against such an existentialist threat.

On all other known and unknown threats, the Alliance Strategic Concept should clarify that NATO must only be asked to act when the vital security of one or more of its members is directly affected. NATO is already global in reach and partnerships, but it should be limited and specific in scope and purpose. NATO should not define its threats in the broad terms of the common global interest or in terms of humanitarianism or the right to protect or to fix any failed state. Potential conflicts over food, water, migration, climate change, and energy security are not by definition NATO's business unless a member's vital interest is directly threatened.

There is one last underlying 'threat' to the Alliance which is not often mentioned: American weakness in the long term. It should boost the allies' rationale to call for stronger participation by all other members. The United States is weakening relative to the strength of its rivals and competitors, the number and significance of global threats, and the capacity of its economy to maintain its current level of military force. Half of U.S. discretionary spending is now absorbed by the Pentagon. US Federal public debt is now 74% of GDP and the annual deficit is 10%, the highest since

1945. Given the additional large unfunded liabilities in Medicare/Medicaid and Social Security in the future, American domestic restraints will sooner or later shrink its security policy.

Allies--and none more so than Canada--must remember that one of the key functions of NATO is to keep the Americans in. If the Americans are not there to lead, other strengths of NATO will not compensate for the loss. Burden sharing in the future is not only about fairness but also about maintaining American leadership.

NATO's Military and Organizational Efficiency

Most of NATO's organizational weaknesses, including its sluggish consensual decision-making, its cost-who-gets-it practice, and uneven troop or risk commitment by allies cannot be fixed by an Alliance Strategic Concept. NATO is not a supranational organization. One cannot mandate equality of troop contribution or troop rotation or even financial contribution in an intergovernmental organization without consensus. Moreover, overly rigid rules on troop commitments or financial quotas may not benefit us in a future situation where Canada may choose not to act as decisively as it has in ISAF.

There has to be indivisibility around military security consultations and decision making. It is very important to a non-EU ally such as Canada that NATO remains the essential and principal forum for decision-making wherever NATO operates. There is constant pressure from various sources in Europe to replace NATO's decision venue with a more direct United States-European Union format, which, to use a popular phrase would be a 'game changer' for Canada. While NATO leaders pledged themselves at the 2009 summit to a "Declaration on Alliance Security," which reaffirms NATO as the essential forum for transatlantic consultation, Canada needs to remain vigilant on this point and be willing to add specific language to the ASC. It is also not in Canada's interest for the EU to take over NATO's defence planning and command function.

The ASC should spell out that the Alliance supports the ESDP doing robust peace tasks in the European theatre, such as in Bosnia and Kosovo, but that it should work through NATO or with NATO in all military operations outside of Europe. With France's re-integration in the military structures of NATO this specification should be easier.

Inequality of interest and effort are a given in international politics including in allied operations and need not per se undermine Alliance solidarity. Recent problems about uneven effort in Afghanistan stem from either a lack of military resources among many continental European allies and/or a lack of political will. You cannot fix these above the state level though the ASC must stipulate the priority of more expeditionary capability among its members. The ASC should raise the expectation

for allies to take on robust military tasks to deal with the military aspects of the threats mentioned above in order for member states to rise to the expected level.

NATO's main military weakness remains the relative dearth of expeditionary forces and capability among most of its continental European members. Of the two million men and women under arms in Europe, only some 100,000 can be turned into a modern and effective expeditionary force. A German expeditionary capacity equal to the UK would be an enormous asset to the Alliance. The uneven capacity of the alliance to act outside Europe will remain a reality for some time to come, but should not tilt it to take on more soft security tasks as a convenient substitute. NATO should cover the military tasks in a comprehensive approach, but not be tasked to add civilian or reconstruction dimensions for which other organizations exist.

Non European-Atlantic democracies should have maximum rights of participation and contribution on global article V tasks, but new membership in this category should only proceed if the mutual defence guarantee is credible both in intent and capability and should be done very gradually. The costs of enlarging and upgrading NATO into a global league of democracies as suggested by some American politicians on both sides of the isle outweigh the benefits at this point in international relations.

In conclusion, NATO is Canada's most important defence and international security tool and Canada should actively negotiate its priorities in the formulation of a new Alliance Strategic Concept. These Canadian interests include:

- NATO must reaffirm the original defence solidarity of its members as Russian policy remains at odds with NATO's interests and values. It is in Canada's interest for NATO to bring Ukraine into the Western structures.
- Second, the ASC must articulate the holistic and long-term threat of totalitarian religion and NATO's military role in defending democratic interests world-wide. Canada has small but effective expeditionary forces and it is in our democratic and economic interest to participate in such NATO operations as we are doing in Afghanistan.
- On all other threats, the Alliance's actions must be confined to direct responses to armed attacks or actions to counter threats to the vital interests of its members.
- The writers of the new Alliance Strategic Concept should keep the decision-making and command process of the Alliance strong and indivisible.
- While strongly encouraging military build-up and greater participation by allies, the ACS must recognize that national commitments will always vary depending on the security situation and must not mandate paper promises that will not be implemented and will ultimately make NATO look weaker.

Endnote

[1] Declaration on Alliance Security, Strasbourg/Kehl, April 4, 2009,
http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52838.htm?mode=pressrelease.