

Future NATO: Guardian of National Interests

Canada and the New Strategic Concept

Alexander Moens

For Canada, NATO is not an international organization of choice but of necessity. Not of necessity in terms of home defence, but in terms of stopping the rise of threats far away. The Atlantic Alliance is the only effective multilateral vehicle in existence today through which to launch forward-based defence actions and international security operations in response to threats to Canadian interests and the interests of its democratic allies.

The strategic reality of Canada is such that its home territory and ocean approaches are defended in close collaboration with the United States. However, threats to the international peace or to allies or trade interests almost always occur far away from Canadian shores. Therefore, in order to mitigate such threats before they have a negative impact on Canadian interests at home, it is in Canada's interest to be able to deploy and intervene far away from home.

This fundamental strategic rationale has held true for Canada since its birth as a truly independent military nation during World War I. The domination of a despotic empire in Europe, whether Nazi or Communist, threatened Canadian freedoms. As such, Canada was a keen participant in the formation of NATO. One of Canada's chief diplomats called the Alliance "a providential solution to so many of our problems..."¹ Thus NATO provided the key vehicle for Canada to help topple or deter such tyranny. In the same vein, the threat of Islamic terrorism arising from Middle Eastern or Asian home bases gives Canada a rationale to participate in NATO securing a stable Afghan state and society.

NATO is also crucial to Canada politically because it binds together North American and European commitments about what constitutes world stability. This binding is stronger and more coherent in action than any other bond, including the United Nations, the G8/G20, or the European Union plus friends.

Without NATO, Canada would fall back on either a hodge-podge of international soft power instruments, a narrow alliance with the United States, or on a type of moralist isolationism. None of NATO's importance means that Canada undervalues the United Nations or the legal and diplomatic route to conflict resolution. Canada remains a strong proponent of multilateral solutions to international problems. For example, Canada took on a considerable share of the so-called G8 Global Partnership in 2002 to dispose of vulnerable nuclear weapon materials and recently joined the Obama Administration in its efforts to strengthen the Non-proliferation Treaty. But at the end of the day, the key instrument for security and military policy for Canada is NATO.

By its recent sacrifice in lives and treasure and by rising to the top-tier of the fighting allies in NATO, Canada has earned a stake in how NATO will fare in Afghanistan and in how it should reform. More than 140 Canadian soldiers have died in this struggle, most of them as a result of Canada's efforts to bring security and development to Kandahar province.² These robust peace operations since 2006 are estimated to have cost the Canadian taxpayer some one billion Canadian dollars per year. Given the combination of Canada's strategic rationale for NATO and its 'put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is' participation in ISAF, Canada has earned a stake in the future reform of the Alliance.



The final report of NATO's 'Group of Experts' chaired by Madeleine Albright has now been submitted and the ball of NATO's future Alliance strategic concept is back in the diplomatic court for final adoption later this year. Rightly, the Group of Experts call for a "renewal of vows" and for a blend of re-affirmation of the old and innovation of the new.³

The analysis that follows is neither a reflection of Canadian government policy nor a review of the report issued by the Group of Experts. Instead, it reflects the author's assessment of Canadian and Alliance interests and the work left for NATO's top decision-makers in preparation for the final adoption of a new Alliance strategic concept.

Threats and NATO's New Mandate

The new Alliance concept should indeed mention at length that NATO seeks peaceful and constructive relations with Russia and that it does not view Moscow as an enemy. But what the leaders should also dare to address is the root cause of this problem which is not the advancement of NATO and the EU towards Eastern Europe as Russia often claims.

Instead, Russia's adamant rejection of economic freedoms and liberal democracy under the Putin-Medvedev regime 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 influence a ring of border states. It wants these states to moderate their democratic aspirations, and to take their foreign policy direction from Moscow.

NATO's mission is not containment. But NATO is not just a partner with Russia. NATO must not become wishy-washy about its counterbalancing and unifying role in Europe. After all, by using force in Georgia and recognizing the sub-region within Georgia, Russia has recently violated a key article of the Alliance's 1991 Strategic Concept as well as the Helsinki Accords that stated that no borders could be moved by the use of force. Correctly, the Group of Experts have put the following important line in their report: "No one should doubt NATO's resolve if the security of any of its member states were to be threatened." Clearly, NATO's concern about keeping European states free and able to choose their own future remains a core task.

There is latent danger of division within the Alliance on Russia. Some NATO Allies such as Germany are bent on accommodating Russia for economic and strategic reasons. In contrast, most of the 13 Central and East European members who have joined NATO since 1997 are clamouring for a modern version of the original NATO in which the common defence (Article V) function dominates

By its recent sacrifice in lives and treasure Canada has earned a stake in how NATO will fare in Afghanistan.
A Canadian soldier meeting with Afghan children (Photo: Canadian Ministry of Defence)

defence policy and planning. They want NATO training, exercises, and installations in Eastern Europe.

Despite the importance of the European Union, NATO still plays a unique political as well as military role in keeping Eastern and Western Europe in solidarity. Canada has a political task alongside the United States to mediate the relationship between Old and New Europe and to provide a transatlantic security link for Eastern Europe that complements the EU's economic and political link. If we consider the future of Ukraine, for example, Canada with its more than one million Canadians of Ukrainian origin still has a role in NATO's European mission.

Global Vital National Security Interests

An 'out-of-area' mandate for NATO is going to be one of the trickiest issues confronting the Alliance strategic concept drafters this time around. Some want to backpedal from the responsibility NATO took on in Afghanistan and shrink NATO's mandate. Others would turn NATO into a global policeman. Most likely a middle road will be forged and the Group of Experts has certainly provided such a course in their report. They still define NATO as a regional organization but also envision actions well beyond Europe's geographical region. The Experts have tried to incorporate the idea of the 'de-territorialization' of the Alliance's collective defence mission.⁴ But they remain cautious about NATO's international role – more it seems for internal political reasons than for strategic reasons.

NATO should not be vague about whether it remains essentially a regional organization or whether it will act more globally. The solution is to focus NATO on direct threats to member states' vital national security interests. Having NATO respond to any and all international security threats will overburden and crack the Alliance. Hence the idea that vital national security interests of member states should find a central place in the new document.

The new strategic concept must explain that the geographical limitation of Article V should not curtail the current understanding of the word 'security' as it occurs in Article IV and V. In other words, the new concept should argue that member states' vital national security interests can now be threatened by state or non-

state actors close by or far away and may or may not involve the violation of the territorial integrity of the North Atlantic area. The report of the Experts puts it this way: "Its [NATO's] new role will be influenced by the emergence of specific threats from a diverse spectrum of possibilities. Such threats may be directed at the territory of Allies or at their citizens, economic lifelines, infrastructure, troops, and even their values." Not only an attack but also the building up of such a threat could be sufficient ground to invoke a request for solidarity of action. The Group of Experts supports this view when they call for the consideration of terrorist threats under Article IV.

It is quite likely that the distinction between Article IV and V as it has been used for in or out-of-area threats and actions is becoming increasingly moot. The relevant question is not so much about area or member state territory but about shared threats and vital national security interest versus all other security challenges.

NATO will likely have more business with fanatical and militant Islamism and the theatre could be anywhere. Jihadist violence is not a monolith in terms of organization but it is also not just extremism. It is an aspiring totalitarian ideology which seeks regime support and state conquest to secure technical, financial, economic, military, and demographic support for its ambition to radicalize Muslim societies and the Diaspora against Western civilization, in other words against NATO's core principles of freedom and civilization.

The Experts are quite right to point out the commonly-shared threat by NATO Allies about an Iran with nuclear weapons. The call for NATO to work closely, including with Russia, on missile defence is urgent and should receive high priority.

I cannot disagree more with the Experts when they write as their first sentence under the section 'Vision and Purpose' that, "[c]ompared to its first decades, NATO between 2010 and 2020 is likely to appear less often on the centre stage of global affairs." Rather, the Alliance – I suspect – will be called upon a great deal. The Alliance is going to be very much more global in the next decades.

While threats to the Alliance will be global, how are we to prevent it from simply becoming a global policeman for all trouble? The key here is to identify the right threats and tasks NATO must be called on, but to leave out those that are not direct threats to the vital national security of its members.

The Group of Experts wrote: "NATO may well be called upon to respond to challenges that do not directly affect its security but that still matter to its citizens and that will contribute to the

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Alliance's international standing." I believe this is a recipe for disaster because it will lead to overburdening, mission creep, and will stretch the solidarity of NATO members to its breaking point. Oddly, in Chapter 4 on 'Political and Organizational Issues' the Experts' Report qualifies the earlier call for an expansive scope of NATO tasks by warning that the Alliance must weigh the extent and imminence of danger to members and that "commitments should not exceed what NATO can do..."

These important limitations should occur under chapters regarding 'Core Tasks' and 'Partnerships.' NATO action should not include common global interests or humanitarian crises or 'the responsibility to protect' or to fix any failed state as part of its mandate unless a member states' vital interest is at stake. Similarly, conflicts caused by migration, climate change, or energy security are not by definition NATO's business unless a member's vital interest is directly threatened. Keeping NATO focused on threats to member states puts considerable pressure on the rest of the international institutional framework, and especially the United Nations Security Council to sort out how to respond.

NATO's Organizational Challenges

A second challenge for the new Alliance strategic concept will be whether NATO's decision-making and operational mechanisms can be reformed to gain more speed, efficiency, coherence and fairness. Canadian officials have expressed considerable urgency on this topic as caveats and risk-aversion have made the task at times unequal in Afghanistan.⁵ The reform proposals are not rocket science and the Experts have made a strong inven-

tory in their report on what must be done to modernize NATO decision-making, operational capacity, and financial coherence. The Experts in turn have drawn on several excellent background studies for these ideas.⁶

In practice, organizational reforms and task-spreading will be much more difficult. One cannot mandate equality of troop contri-



Canada's Minister of Defence, Peter MacKay (r.), conferring with his Afghan counterpart, Abdul Rahim Wardak, during a meeting of nations contributing to ISAF in Brussels, June 2010 (Photo: NATO)

bution or troop rotation or risk exposure in an intergovernmental organization.

The report of the Experts does not give much attention to the relationship between NATO and the European Union. It is still crucial to a non-EU ally such as Canada that NATO remains the essential and principal forum for decision-making on security between Europe and North America. There is constant pressure from various sources in Europe to replace NATO's decision venue with a direct United States-European Union format, which – to use a popular phrase – would be a 'game changer' for Canada.

NATO's main military weakness remains the relative dearth of expeditionary forces capability among most of its continental European members. Canada has invested a great deal in its armed forces in the last five years and is now in a stronger position to help others build relevant capability. While strongly encouraging military build-up and greater participation by Allies, the Alliance strategic concept must not mandate paper promises that will not be implemented and will ultimately make NATO look weaker.

The Report issued by the Experts calls for a good deal more activity by NATO on the so-called comprehensive approach, including the capacity to plan and command the civilian aspects of operations. Time will tell how this ambition plays out in the NATO-EU relationship. Civilian operations, law enforcement and nation-building are the EU's strength and any NATO gain in this area may be resisted by some European Allies because it would mean reverse duplication. It is not worthwhile to weaken the European support of NATO in order to add civilian power to its toolbox.

Is the Obama team asking enough of its Allies?

Conclusion

The Obama Administration has created a positive atmosphere for a collegial process to rewrite the Alliance's strategic concept. All of this transatlantic goodwill is music to the ears of a transatlantic ally such as Canada. The earlier and controversial American idea of forging out of NATO a league of global democracies does not appear as a strong demand this time around.

Before we all congratulate each other, we should consider whether the Obama team is asking enough of its Allies. NATO faces the

geopolitical fact that the United States is weakening in three dimensions. American power is declining 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. American debt trends are very serious. Fiscal restraints will sooner or later limit its security policy. Therefore, NATO burden-sharing in the next stage of our shared future is not so much about fairness as about maintaining international security by means of American leadership. Canada and Europe both have a large stake in boosting this strategic leadership.

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1. In the words of Escott Reid as quoted in Joseph Jockel and Joel Sokolsky, 'Canada and NATO,' *International Journal*, Spring 2009, p. 316.
2. For a more detailed account of Canadian efforts in Afghanistan, see: Alexander Moens, 'Afghanistan and the Revolution in Canadian Foreign Policy,' *International Journal*, Vol. 63 No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 569-586.
3. NATO Texts: 'NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement,' www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_63654.htm#p1.
4. As noted by David Yost in: Bram Boxhoorn and David den Dunnen (eds.), *NATO's New Strategic Concept* (The Hague: Netherlands Atlantic Association, 2009), p. 30.
5. James Sperling and Mark Webber, 'NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul,' *International Affairs*, Vol. 85 No. 3, 2009. See especially pp. 503-509 on burden-sharing and risk-sharing.
6. For example, 'Alliance Reborn: An Atlantic Compact for the 21st Century,' Atlantic Council of the United States, February 2009; and 'Security in an Uncertain World,' Conference of Defence Associations and Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, 2010.