

It's time to renovate NATO

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OTTAWA—The Canadian public has always been of two (or more) minds about NATO, but the reasoning behind the ambivalence has shifted somewhat over time. For the first 40 years of NATO, there was some constancy amongst the naysayers. After any major military conflict, including both world wars and Korea, Canadians have had an understandable reaction to draw back from any prospect of armed conflict. Furthermore, we have spent some effort mythologizing ourselves as a non-military people. Plus many Canadians are just plain cheap, particularly when it comes to security and defence. And others wondered how much effort we needed to put (again) into defending Europe. There was an inclination to fall back on the outdated, but visceral sense that our geography might permit a benign isolationism.

On the other hand, most agreed that the Soviet Union and its allies did threaten us, both ideologically and militarily, and NATO was a key element of our response. Ironically, some of those who were rather less concerned about that threat, and who were uneasy about being too close to the U.S., saw our involvement in NATO as a partial antidote to what would otherwise have been a defence relationship exclusively with the Americans. Canadians have made multilateralism almost into a religion, and NATO suited that in our sense of self. And for some, links with Europe via NATO helped to maintain a relationship with the lands from which they or their parents and grandparents had come.

But living in NATO was never easy. The consensus requirement in most aspects of NATO governance is notoriously ponderous and frustrating. And then the Cold War ended, a bit abruptly for some. NATO, while seeming on the surface to continue as before, shifted focus. So today, its tool kit doesn't perfectly align with its tasks.

Some commitment of resources in advance on some agreed ratios is desperately needed to enable more timely responses. Indeed, with the modern evolution of threats, most critical NATO responses lie somewhere between the situations envisioned in either Article 4, where consultation is required in case of threat, or Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, where an attack against one is an attack against all. There is no Article 4.5 to facilitate a robust response to serious threats that are just short of existential. Therefore, NATO will need to invent both the rapid response tools and the strategic framework to nip such threats in the bud, and to serve the broader ideals espoused in the ringing words of the treaty.

And so, in its elephantine fashion, NATO has recently set out to update its strategic concept. The current Secretary General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who until April 2009 was Prime Minister of Denmark, has launched that NATO reform process by first gathering together a group of very prominent experts, chaired by Madeline Albright of the U.S., to give advice on the way ahead, before turning to the member states for their take on the new strategic concept.

Thankfully, the group of experts decided to cast its net broadly, seeking input not just from member states but also from relevant non-governmental organizations.

It was this opportunity that prompted two major Canadian think-tanks, the Conference of Defence Associations Institute and the Canadian Defence And Foreign Affairs Institute, to join forces to make a very detailed submission from a Canadian perspective. Called "Security in an Uncertain World," the 50-page paper was written by former diplomat Paul Chapin in collaboration with an impressive list of 26 academics, former diplomats, and former senior military leaders. It was released on March 24, in the hope of influencing NATO, both directly and through Canadian official representation, to repair some of its most trying deficiencies, to look beyond the Cold War, and to find better, quicker and fairer ways to advance its founding values.

Clearly, Canadians still need NATO to give effect to our attachment to multilateralism. Indeed, NATO has, in some ways, also become the implementation device for UN decisions. But Canadians sense that a renewed NATO needs some improvements. We feel acutely the imbalance in burden-sharing in Afghanistan.

And while the NATO community is a core grouping that reflects and represents the ideas and ideals of the world's developed and democratic states, it risks being too Euro-centric. Securing the Euro-Atlantic community is important but the alliance also needs tangible links with a few comparable states or groupings outside of Europe, particularly in the Pacific where Canada has vital interests. Some wonder if a whole new alliance might be the answer, but empirically, one has a better chance of success building on what exists than one does starting from scratch.

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