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Canada Should Reemphasize Its Place in NATO

By Basel Ammane

While NATO skepticism is by no means a recent phenomenon, the whirlwind unleashed by US President Donald Trump's blistering declarations and searing criticism of NATO has thrust the alliance into the spotlight in a way it has not been in recent memory. A recent paper discussing whether it is in Canada's interest to remain in an alliance that as far as the author was concerned had lost its primary purpose was published by the Canadian Global Affairs Institute's (CGAI) Ariel Shapiro, entitled "NATO If Necessary, But not Necessarily NATO." In it, the author advanced a host of arguments that painted the membership as costlier than understood (especially given the manner in which being in the alliance influences the way the country spends on its defence), downplayed the supposed benefits the country garnered from being in the alliance (deterrence), and drew attention to the risks of continued membership (challenging Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic and the possibility of being dragged into war).

The paper did not go as far as advocating the abandonment of the alliance, but it cautioned against affording the membership a sacrosanct status that shields it from a critical appraisal.¹ However, it was clear from the outset that NATO was portrayed as an organization that is, and should be, solely anchored in collective defence, despite mentioning in passing that the alliance shared common values during the Cold War. The paper went on to point out the imperfections that beset some of the alliance's democracies. Even when the paper discussed collective security, it cast doubt on Canada's ability to provide any meaningful support to European security in the absence of American investment.

NATO, Canada and the US

An argument that the paper sought to refute was the idea that NATO was necessary for the sustenance of good relations between the US and Canada. To demonstrate the lack of spillover between Canada's refusal to cooperate with the US on an important decision and other policy areas where Canadian interests are concerned, the author pointed to the

absence of a change in US trade policy with Canada that was traceable to the latter's refusal to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom.² The upshot of this was that membership in NATO is not rewarded by our southern neighbour through concessions. What was omitted, however, was the important role NATO plays in balancing reliance on defence coordination with the US with Canada's most important European allies, namely the United Kingdom and France. In his attempt to uncover the reasoning that underpins Canada's decisions to participate in military campaigns or peace keeping activities across the globe, Massie argued that Canada's strategic culture of soft-balancing Atlanticism propels it to take positions that are consistent with its North Atlantic allies within NATO.³ The same idea was expressed as a policy prescription by Paquin.⁴ This balancing act is important given that an excessive dependence on defence collaboration with the US and a position of irrelevance in NATO can result in compromising Canadian sovereignty. Hence, a realist perspective that doesn't take into account the impact of this position on sovereignty misses an important element in the picture.

Ideological Differences Have Not Dissipated

One of the most essential assumptions, the paper relies on in advancing the argument in favour of downgrading the importance of Canada's NATO membership, is the idea that there is no longer a global rivalry with Russia, and that inter-state competition with Russia (or China), to the extent that it exists, is not coloured by ideological animosity the way it was during the Cold War. This, according to an analysis by Walker and Ludwig, seems to fly in the face of recent developments whereby both Russia and China have sought to influence the political discourse in democratic countries in the realms of the media, culture, think tanks and academia⁵; including interference in elections.⁶ The aim of said influence is not broadening the debate or sharing alternative ideas as they claim, but rather to distract and manipulate the public in democratic countries by capitalizing on their tendency to relativize discourse. The exercise of what they termed "sharp power" is accompanied with the erection of barriers to outside influence at home. Russia's focus in particular, given its inability to portray its authoritarian regime as attractive, has been on tarnishing the image of democracy in the eyes of Western publics. The impetus of this is a quest for power. However, one cannot ignore the role of an ideological commitment

“that privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought.”⁷ Therefore, potentially contributing to the dissolution of NATO by withdrawing from it precisely when the waves of democratization seem to be receding is immensely discouraged.

Russian Militarization in the Arctic

While discussing the risks of continued membership in the alliance, the author stated that “the greatest challenge to Canada’s Arctic, comes not from Russia but from Canada’s allies themselves.”⁸ He further blamed NATO for unnecessary securitization of the region that would make it difficult to solve disagreements through legal dispute resolution mechanisms. This, unfortunately, does not seem to be borne out by facts. In what has been dubbed Russia’s “biggest Arctic military push since Soviet fall,” there has been a movement to construct new icebreakers including nuclear ones, and open up previously deserted military, air and radar bases on “remote Arctic islands.” This will give the country a permanent and active military presence in the region.⁹ In light of this build-up, a recent track record of territorial annexation in its self-declared spheres of interest (Ukraine and Georgia), and a reliance on fossil fuel extraction (a resource found in abundance in the Arctic region) it is difficult to argue that NATO’s deterrent force is not needed to ensure the continued efficacy of dispute resolution bodies such as the Arctic Council. Canada, without help from its NATO allies, won’t be able to deter Russia given the disparity in military strength. This perspective is shared by Lindley-French, a CGAI fellow, who criticized the recent increases in Canadian defence budget for being insufficient.¹⁰ Moreover, remaining part of a NATO that is focused on the Arctic has the twin benefit of encouraging Denmark to remain engaged with Canada in an attempt to resolve territorial disputes given the goodwill sustained by virtue of both being members of a community of values, and making it possible for Canada to shift defence resources to the Arctic while still arguing that such spending is good for NATO.

The Importance of Soft Power for Canada

The paper criticizes the difficulty of measuring influence that results from being part of the alliance. It points to the example of Sweden, among others, as a country that opted to abstain from joining NATO but has not lost any of the benefits that come with the membership. Notwithstanding differences between

Canada and Sweden in terms of their geo-strategic positions which have enabled the latter to stake out a position of neutrality in global affairs¹¹, the country, sensing increased Russian belligerence, has recently shifted away from this position. In fact, it recently announced plans to boost the defence budget and reintroduce conscription.¹²

While it is difficult to measure the impact of participation that does not mean it is not real. Having a seat at the table can be thought of as an end in and of itself because it allows for the projection of an independent Canadian voice and image, something that is necessary for sustaining a perception of strong Canadian sovereignty. Moreover, given its middle power status, Canada is invested in multilateralism as a policy orientation. This has been reflected in rhetorical and physical support for UN peacekeeping, as well as out-of-area NATO interventions that enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy. In fact, it is arguable that the emergence and continued relevance of global collective security as a priority for NATO fits Canadian foreign policy objectives. A world in which international law and institutions diminish in stature and are displaced by great power politics is not one Canada can thrive in. As such, Canada should continue to support the existence of the rule-based post-WWII international order of which a NATO anchored in democratic values is a constitutive part.

Support for NATO within the US

Despite the NATO-skeptical attitude of the Trump administration, support for NATO remains robust in policy circles and among the public. The CGAI paper cited a study by Gallup conducted in early 2017 which indicated that support for the alliance among republican voters was 28 percent less than democrats. Nevertheless, it neglected to mention that despite enjoying less support among Republican voters, a majority of them still expressed support for it. What’s more, levels of support for NATO now are actually higher than they were across all categories, including independents in 1995.¹³ Ignoring this might have the effect of suggesting that support for NATO is at an exceptionally low point which is patently inaccurate. Furthermore, there does not seem to be a wide divergence between the pro-NATO views of the foreign policy establishment and those of the public.¹⁴ Trump’s pressure is likely to result in significant increases in European countries’ defence budgets. Should this materialize, it would likely reduce the pressure on Canada, and the US to a lesser extent, to

support deterrence efforts in Eastern Europe. This would, in turn, free up resources to remain engaged abroad while bolstering Canadian presence in the Arctic.

Conclusion

Shapiro's paper seems to advocate an isolationist foreign policy in the area of defence and security. It argues in favour of a qualitative change in defence spending that is accompanied by a quantitative reduction. The arguments advanced are underpinned by a perception of Canada as a country with only regional interests despite expressing openness to Canada participating in joint military operations on an ad hoc basis. It also displays a high level of comfort with the further entrenchment of the country into the United States' sphere of influence. I have argued in my response that given the importance of NATO in

balancing against Canada's strong reliance on the US, the emergence of new ideological assaults on democracy, evidence of Russian militarization of the Arctic, the perennial importance of soft power for Canada and continued support for NATO in the United States, Canada ought to remain part of a vigilant NATO that is globally engaged.

The commentary and analysis expressed here represent the author's own.

¹ Shapiro, Ariel, NATO If Necessary, But Not Necessarily NATO: Critically Evaluating Canada's Membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (n.d.). Retrieved December 15, 2017, from http://www.cgai.ca/nato_if_necessary_but_not_necessarily_nato (P. 2)

² Ibid, p13.

³ Massie, J. (2009). Making Sense of Canadas "irrational" International Security Policy. *International Journal: Canadas Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 64(3), 625-645. doi:10.1177/002070200906400303 (643)

⁴ Paquin, J. (2008). Canadian Foreign and Security Policy: Reaching a Balance between Autonomy and North American Harmony in the Twenty-first Century. Retrieved from http://www.cms.fss.ulaval.ca/upload/pol/fichiers/cfp_article.pdf

⁵ Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017, November 16). The Meaning of Sharp Power. Retrieved December 16, 2017, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

⁶ Dorell, O. (2017, September 07). Alleged Russian political meddling documented in 27 countries since 2004. Retrieved December 17, 2017, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/09/07/alleged-russian-political-meddling-documented-27-countries-since-2004/619056001/>

⁷ Walker, C., & Ludwig, J., The Meaning of Sharp Power. Retrieved December 17, 2017

⁸ Shapiro, Ariel, NATO If Necessary, But Not Necessarily NATO, p19.

⁹ McBride, E. B. (2017, January 31). Putin's Russia in biggest Arctic military push since Soviet fall. Retrieved December 18, 2017, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-arctic-insight/putins-russia-in-biggest-arctic-military-push-since-soviet-fall-idUSKBN15E0W0>

¹⁰ Lindley-French, J. (2017, November). Brexit and the Shifting Pillars of NATO. Retrieved December 19, 2017, from https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/cdfai/pages/3016/attachments/original/1510852023/Brexit_and_the_Shifting_Pillars_of_NATO.pdf?1510852023 (P. 6)

¹¹ Pike, J. (n.d.). Sweden - Swedish Neutrality. Retrieved December 18, 2017, from <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/se-neutrality.htm>

¹² Jazeera, A. (2017, March 13). Sweden boosts 2017 military spending by \$55m. Retrieved December 19, 2017, from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/sweden-boosts-2017-military-spending-55m-170313164719600.html>

¹³ Gallup, I. (2017, February 17). Most Americans Support NATO Alliance. Retrieved December 19, 2017, from <http://news.gallup.com/poll/204071/americans-support-nato-alliance.aspx>

¹⁴ Taylor, A. (2017, April 20). Analysis | A new poll suggests that maybe American voters and D.C. foreign policy elites aren't so different after all. Retrieved December 19, 2017, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/20/a-new-poll-suggests-that-maybe-american-voters-and-d-c-foreign-policy-elites-arent-so-different-after-all/>