

Canada and the Transformation of NATO

By Nic Boisvert

As the Minister and the Chief of Defence Staff confer with their colleagues at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, it is appropriate to reflect on Canada's continuing role in the North Atlantic alliance. Canadians played a decisive part being "present at the creation" of NATO in 1949, shaping it to a great degree in their desired image. Recent Canadian actions are having no less of an impact, and the law of unintended consequences may have effects that are equally salutary in the present-day transformation of NATO.

Canadian officials (both civilian and uniformed) have been blundering their way about some rather delicate NATO affairs. The debate over 'out-of-area' operations had been going on before September 11th. Although NATO quickly invoked Article V and deployed AWACS units to North America, the Alliance's inability to take the fight to the enemy was underscored by Canada's first action in the War Against Terrorism – withdrawing the frigate attached to the Standing Naval Force Atlantic to send it as the vanguard unit for operations off Afghanistan. Leaving that commitment 'gapped' ever since is a sure indication of Canadian defence priorities in an era of limited resources. It did not speak well for NATO's relevance.

In a related vein came Canada's commitment to send 'peacekeepers' to Kabul to avoid getting embroiled in Iraq. But when the Minister checked the numbers and discovered (as his military officials had said) it could not be done on our own, he blithely allowed that he would "ask NATO to help" – after all, the Germans and Dutch were running ISAF, and the British and Turks already had cycled through. Trouble was, Afghanistan is 'out-of-area', and the French were the most vocal critics of the alliance operating outside of established bounds. Thanks to the Canadian push, however, the debate was forced into the open. It has now been settled and, as a result, NATO is not only helping out in Kabul, but will be assisting new member Poland in governing a sector of another 'out-of-area' problem – Iraq. One wonders what the Canadian contribution will be.

Then there is NATO's re-organization into two major Commands: SACEUR has been restyled as NATO Command 'Operations', and SACLANT is the new NATO Command 'Transformation'. Co-located at the headquarters of US Second Fleet in Norfolk, SACLANT was always seen as a cozy naval preserve – indeed the secret of SACLANT's success was that it was run essentially by American and Canadian naval officers (the Deputy Commander has been a Canadian rear-admiral). But when the US decided to 'transform' its forces by naming a Marine as Commander Second Fleet, Canada followed suit by sending down one of its own Army generals – Mike Maisonneuve, fresh from National Defence Headquarters. The whispers in NDHQ are that the Army banished him there because he had become a little too 'joint' in his previous jobs. But his new appointment is likely to have the opposite effect. The Navy and Marine Corps have been leading the US military transformation, and linking NATO transformation to the former SACLANT organization will pull the alliance along that

path. The valuable lessons Maisonneuve will gain from his 'naval' experience – the same ones the Canadian Navy has been practicing over the past decade – could be just the kick our Army needs to get on with its own real transformation.

The next agenda item, in a roundabout way, is the Congo. Through Canadian machinations at the UN, former CDS Maurice Baril has been named to head a mission there. It is doomed, because just as the Congo is larger than Ontario and Quebec combined, the problem is bigger than General Baril. Indeed, it is bigger than the European Union, which under French command is dispatching a 1400-member stabilization force, advertised as “an important political step for European defence cooperation.” What does that say for the supposedly “critical” Canadian air transport assistance? Besides lacking recognition, it is helping the EU undermine NATO’s integrity. Africa’s problems invariably stem from Europe’s colonial baggage, but frankly the Euros don’t have the organizational or numerical horsepower to pull it off. A more reasonable structure would correspond, coincidentally, to the 20,000-strong NATO Rapid Response Force, to which Canadian interests are more appropriately tied.

Sorting out the Congo is key to putting Africa on the path to progress. Prime Minister Chretien is concerned about the desperate situation there, but the CF are in no shape to intervene effectively. His desire speaks to a major NATO operation. Although a significant test for Operations Command, it would be an appropriate ‘out-of-area’ commitment. It would bring much-needed organizational cover to the European effort, and direct Canada’s own priorities back to the main alliance. All of which would give a boost to sorting out the transformation of NATO.

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