



Canadian Defence Policy

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NATO and Nuclear Disarmament III – Understanding the Other, when the other is Russia

It's clear from Cold War arms control agreements that political harmony and broad strategic cooperation are not prerequisites for progress on nuclear disarmament. It is nevertheless hard to see the US and Russia launching new rounds of nuclear arms control talks without some serious efforts at building mutual trust and understanding within the Euro/Atlantic¹ political/security arena, even if that cannot be guaranteed to yield broad areas of agreement. Ultimately, better understanding and the rational management of conflicting interests will have to be underwritten by restrained political-military practices that seek to build confidence and, notably, point towards a renewed arms control agenda – in other words, the kinds of mutual security arrangements envisioned through the OSCE. The prospects for that level of political maturity taking firm hold in the current circumstances are not particularly bright – but that doesn't mean they are any less necessary.

Canadians are frequently cast as bridge-builders, but that level of political maturity is notably absent in a new report on “Russian aggression in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia,” issued this past December by the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN).² The report's exclusive focus on “Russian aggression,” defined in the report exclusively by Russia's ardent adversaries, abandons even a pretense of the kind of nuance and recognition of complexity that spanning political and security divides demands. The only witnesses³ called were either from the three states charging aggression or from a group of Atlantic Council analysts described as “part of a greater Atlantic Council team devoted to supporting Ukraine as it fights Russian aggression....” The charges set out before the Committee are certainly to be taken seriously and the perspectives are obviously legitimate, but resolving conflicts and bridging divides requires that the perspectives of all relevant parties be heard.

In this case, no witnesses from Russia, or even from other European states, were called. Research and analysis institutions like the International Crisis Group (ICG), Carnegie Europe, or the European Leadership Network (ELN), all with relevant programs and expertise, were not consulted. Most notably, the OSCE itself (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), of which Canada is a member, as are Russia and the three countries featured in the NDDN report, was not consulted, even though the OSCE has programs and a presence in all three countries that are the focus of the Parliamentary study.

The recommendations are thus not a surprise – reflecting the perspectives of the witnesses heard. The Committee, among other things, thus calls for parliamentary dialogue with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; continued military training in the Ukraine; new sanctions against Russia; and support for bringing Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia into NATO. It's not that the 13 recommendations are all without merit, but compare the NDDN's one-sided approach to that of a July 2017 position paper on relations with Russia issued by the ELN.⁴ Its recommendations include calls to avoid military acquisitions and deployments that are likely to escalate tensions in Europe, to respect the mutual restraint promised in the NATO-Russia Founding Act,⁵ to implement existing arms control and confidence-building agreements and explore additional measures, and, notably, to initiate a comprehensive dialogue on conditions for durable strategic stability in Europe.

Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia must ultimately, and obviously so, find stability and security in a neighborhood in which Russia will remain a dominant presence in the foreseeable future. But, as with Balkan and east European NATO members that remain understandably wary of Russia's intentions toward them, it is incumbent on all these vulnerable states and their backers to develop credible security assurances that don't simply escalate threats and exacerbate tensions. And that needs to include the recognition that NATO's steady post-Cold War expansion and more recent military postures, however much the latter are defended as responses to Russia's much more egregious provocations and its violations of international norms and laws, are destabilizing and, notably, an impediment to further progress in nuclear arms control.

That the Euro/Atlantic political environment has taken on the trappings of a Cold War is not really in dispute, but what is obviously less widely accepted is the extent to which NATO's policies have contributed to this dynamic and to what is threatening to become chronic instability. NATO is not simply the victim of deteriorated east/west relations, it is a contributor to them. Carleton University's Chancellor's Professor Joan DeBardeleben told Canada's House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,⁶ that Russian security concerns are exacerbated by "NATO expansion into its neighborhood" and by a sense that Russia is excluded "from effective influence on European security arrangements." Prof. Stephen Cohen of Princeton and New York Universities, a specialist in Russian studies and politics who challenges the relentless promotion of a new Cold War by American foreign policy elites,⁷ reminds us that NATO expansion to Russia's borders involved two broken promises. In 1990 the Americans and West Germans assured Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not spread eastward if Gorbachev supported German unification (this is a disputed claim, but Cohen says it is confirmed by participants and archival evidence). NATO also promised it would not install permanent military forces next to Russia, a promise Russia deems to have been violated not least by NATO ballistic missile defence deployments.

Understanding Russian interests

It should surprise no one that Russia would prefer a neighborhood more sympathetic to its interests than it considers its new NATO neighbors to be. The desire for states on one's borders that promise stability, and for a neighborhood in which one has some role and influence in shaping regional security arrangements, are not uniquely Russian expectations. In other words, as Prof. DeBardeleben put it, Russia's desire for a neighborhood in which it has influence cannot simply to be equated with an expansionist or imperialist impulse.⁸ Cohen points out that NATO's rapid post-Cold War expansion

towards Russia “is the largest and fastest growth of a ‘sphere of influence’ [American] in modern peacetime history.” Yet Russia is repeatedly denounced for seeking to promote a zone of security and stability on its borders.⁹

New York writer Tony Wood, author of the November 2018 book, *Russia without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War*, argues that the eastward expansion of NATO, objected to by some notable American foreign policy icons like George Kennan, “helped to generate the threat it was supposedly intended to counter,” and helped “to legitimize a return to a more confrontational stance on Russia’s part.”¹⁰

It has once again become politically toxic to try to see ourselves as others see us when the other is Russia. To say that there is context for Russian action (in the Ukraine, for instance), is once again met with Cold War-style derision, but, also once again, it is necessary to point out that understanding the context behind behaviour is not to argue that there is justification for, or wisdom in, that behaviour. Ignoring the context probably means misunderstanding the behaviour. And misunderstanding the roots of Russian action or behaviour leaves the Kremlin’s interlocutors ill-equipped to respond in ways that speak to Russia’s legitimate, or at least prominently held, concerns and fears. Acknowledging that a Russian point of view can be very different from ours and still be rational is not to acquiesce to Russian violations of international law or to buy into a Trumpian take on the charms of Vladimir Putin.

Détente, meaning literally the release of tension, is now an old-fashioned word, but given the renewed prominence of Cold War themes and habits, it deserves to be reintroduced into contemporary political vocabulary. Even in the ranks of liberal-progressive elements that were once champions of détente, who tried to go beyond demonizing adversaries and chose instead to promote understanding and modified perspectives through engagement and dialogue, any thoughts of détente with Russia now mostly provoke charges of appeasement. A recent lengthy analysis in *The Atlantic* sees the Democrats now attacking the Trump Administration’s foreign policy from the right, warning against rapprochement and engagement and charging Trump with being insufficiently hawkish.¹¹

One example of a needlessly hardened line is European missile defence, given that in 2010 NATO and Russia formally agreed to explore cooperation. The Lisbon NATO Summit that year included a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) which agreed on “a comprehensive Joint Analysis of the future framework for missile defence cooperation.” They promised to review the results at the 2011 meeting of NRC Defence Ministers.” After the Summit, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, had it about right: “We will either come to terms on missile defense and form a full-fledged joint mechanism of cooperation or ... we will plunge into a new arms race and have to think of deploying new strike means, and it’s obvious that this scenario will be very hard.”¹²

The 2010 promise of BMD cooperation was compelling. The Brookings Institution’s Steven Pifer,¹³ among others, argued that cooperative BMD would facilitate further arsenal reductions, enhance protections for Europe, including European Russia, and, by making NATO and Russia allies in protecting Europe, it would fundamentally change the East-West strategic relationship. But it wasn’t to be. Russia wanted a “legal guarantee” that US missile defence would not be directed against Russian strategic nuclear forces, and there was no way the American Congress would give it – it would compromise American sovereignty, they argued. Medvedev’s warning turned out to be prescient - the

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty is now hanging by a thread, the New START Treaty is set to expire in February 2021, and the world now faces the prospect that for the first time in more than four decades there will be no formal Treaty limits on American and Russian nuclear arsenals (just as both are in the midst of massive nuclear “modernization” programs).

Dialogue on strategic stability

The Euro/Atlantic region, with the OSCE as the regional organization, is a diverse arena and the peoples and nations that share it are going to have to evolve a much more effective set of co-habitation arrangements that are not rooted in the threats and capacity for mutual annihilation. It is an evolutionary process that will continue to flounder without an extensive, ongoing security dialogue with Russia that explores conditions for region-wide security and stability.

Canadian Parliamentarians in another context are familiar with calls for “a new high-level dialogue on deterrence and security issues writ large.”¹⁴ Carleton University’s Prof. DeBardeleben told the Foreign Affairs Committee in 2017 that “Canada should support the initiation of a cross-European, transatlantic security dialogue...to engage in an open consideration of how the existing security architecture might be revised to take account both of Russia's security concerns, which it feels NATO expansion has undermined, as well as the security and sovereignty concerns of small and medium-sized European countries that feel threatened by Russia.”¹⁵ And the OSCE is in fact currently hosting a “structured dialogue on the current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area.”¹⁶ It was launched in 2016 in order “to foster a greater understanding” of opportunities for confidence building measures and arms control, and for understanding the wider political-military context.

The immediate impetus for this OSCE dialogue was the heightened political tensions and especially the intensified military activities that were, and still are, risking escalation and disastrous miscalculations. The talks have been centred in an Informal Working Group chaired by Germany, which the Security and Human Rights Monitor describes as “the only international forum for regular, inclusive and structured dialogue on military security issues” – but it also warns that conflicting views on the efficacy and focus of the dialogue have put the whole effort in jeopardy.¹⁷ Participants saw multiple ways in which this structured dialogue could potentially ease tensions and build more constructive relations between Russia and the west: through trust-building; enhanced military-to-military contacts; systematic analysis of trends in military force postures and exercises; develop incident prevention mechanisms; review threat perceptions with a view to identifying shared interests; and reviving conventional arms control.¹⁸ NATO’s 2018 Summit Communique supports the dialogue and urges Russian cooperation.

OSCE Secretary-General Thomas Greminger describes the current European security environment as “unstable and unpredictable,” where “military exercises are larger and more frequent, and are often conducted with no-notice and in sensitive areas” and “risk escalation from miscalculation or misunderstanding.”¹⁹ Not only is the current situation dangerous, he says, “perceptions of the core reasons for the current state of affairs and how to find a way out are deeply divergent.” Hence, there is an urgent need for constructive dialogue to “stop,” as he puts it, “the slide toward instability and confrontation.”

Without an even broader security dialogue and the more nuanced understanding it would promote, says UK analyst Paul Rogers, the “Russian threat” will continue to be used to demand greater military spending and a more abrasive stance towards Moscow – which actually helps to strengthen Putin domestically,²⁰ and it most certainly promotes ever more generous funding of Western military-industrial interests. A step away from this counter-productive dynamic was recently proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev and George P. Shultz (US Secretary of State in the Reagan Administration) in a joint *Washington Post* op-ed that called for the “creation of an informal forum of US and Russian experts to address the changes in the security landscape...”²¹

Dialogue and engagement are long-term strategies, precisely the kind that Canada’s commitment to multilateralism and aspirational bridge-building should embrace and promote.

Canadian Parliamentarians, as reflected in the December 2018 NDDN report, are right to be concerned about Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Georgian security, but they won’t get a clear understanding of what a constructive Canadian response should be without hearing from, and trying to better understand, the forces and interests that those states fear. Without more deliberate efforts by both sides of the east-west divide to better understand the other, nurtured by dialogue and engagement that should be at the core of Canadian contributions to Euro/Atlantic security, nuclear arms control will remain dangerously sidelined.

Notes

¹ The two terms – trans-Atlantic and pan-European – refer to the entire OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) region.

² “Responding to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in the Black Sea Region,” Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence, Stephen Fuhr, Chair, Chair, December 2018, 42nd Parliament, 1st Session. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/report-14/>

³ NDDN List of Witnesses:

June 12/18 - Embassy of Ukraine; Parliament of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada).

June 14/18 - Embassy of the Republic of Moldova.

November 6/18 – Four analysts from the Atlantic Council who described themselves as being “part of a greater Atlantic Council team devoted to supporting Ukraine as it fights Russian aggression and moves forward on reform, and more broadly, encouraging the west to push back against Kremlin revisionism designed to upend the security system that emerged in Europe and Eurasia at the end of the Cold War. That’s what we’ve come to discuss with you today.”

December 04/18 - Embassy of Georgia; Embassy of the Republic of Moldova; Embassy of Ukraine

⁴ “Managing the Cold Peace between Russia and the West,” European Leadership Network Position Paper No. V, 6 July 2017. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/group-statement/managing-the-cold-peace-between-russia-and-the-west/>

⁵ NATO and Russia committed to (among other things): strengthening the OSCE; “refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence...;” cooperation in conflict prevention and crisis management; and cooperation in arms control. Founding

Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, 1997.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm

⁶ Prof. Joan DeBardeleben, Carleton University, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, Evidence, Tuesday, February 14, 2017. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/FAAE/meeting-46/evidence>

⁷ Cohen laments that, “for the first time in decades of Cold War history,” there are “no countervailing forces in Washington – no pro-détente wing of the Democratic or Republican party, no influential anti-Cold War opposition anywhere, no real public debate.” Stephen F. Cohen, “War With Russia?” *The Nation*, 03 December 2018. <https://www.thenation.com>

⁸ DeBardeleben, February 14, 2017.

⁹ Stephen F. Cohen, “Have 20 Years of NATO Expansion Made Anyone Safer?” *The Nation*, 18 October 2017. <https://www.thenation.com>

¹⁰ Tony Wood, “NATO and the Myth of the Liberal International Order,” *The New York Review of Books*, 21 August 2018. <https://www.nybooks.com/contributors/tony-wood/>

¹¹ Peter Beinart, “America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age,” *The Atlantic*, September 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com>

¹² Steven A. Hildreth and Carl Ek, “Missile Defense and NATO’s Lisbon Summit,” Congressional Research Service Report R41549, 11 January 2011. www.crs.gov

¹³ Steven Pifer, “NATO-Russia Missile Defense: Compromise is Possible,” The Brookings Institution, 28 December 2012. <https://www.brookings.edu>

¹⁴ Richard Sokolsky and Gordon Adams, “The Problem with NATO’s Nukes: Time to Rid Europe of its Cold War Legacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 09 February 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>

¹⁵ DeBardeleben, February 14, 2017.

¹⁶ “From Lisbon to Hamburg: Declaration on the Twentieth Anniversary of the OSCE Framework for Arms Control,” OSCE Ministerial Council, 09 December 2016. OSCE MC.DOC/4/16

¹⁷ Christian Nünlist, “Under Pressure: The Uncertain Future of the OSCE Structured Dialogue,” *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, 29 November 2018. <https://www.shrmonitor.org>

¹⁸ Stephanie Liechtenstein, “OSCE Structured Dialogue: Countering the Risk of Military Escalation in Europe,” *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, 18 November 2017. <https://www.shrmonitor.org>

¹⁹ Thomas Greminger, “It is Time to Revitalize Political-Military Dialogue in the OSCE,” European Leadership Network, 06 December 2017. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org>

²⁰ Rogers regards the “Russian threat” as “greatly overplayed. Russia’s economy is about the size of Italy’s and much smaller than the United Kingdom’s, and while it spends a larger proportion of its GDP on the military its budget is only marginally bigger than the UK’s and only a tenth of Nato’s as a whole. In most fields the US is ahead and China frequently on a par: while Russia’s elite special forces are competent, most conventional forces are underfunded, undertrained and under-equipped, and some parts (such as the Pacific fleet) are a shadow of their former power. In addition there are cost pressures in many areas, in the context of public opposition to tax increases.” Paul Rogers, “Nato, and a thinking gap,” *OpenDemocracy*, 14 July 2018. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/nato-and-thinking-gap>

²¹ Mikhail Gorbachev and George P. Shultz, “We participated in INF negotiations. Abandoning it threatens our very existence.” The Washington Post, 04 December 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com>