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Selecting MacKay as NATO head would reward Canada's heavy lifting



Of the many Canadians who could run the NATO alliance, Nova Scotia's Peter MacKay has the most experience, writes Tim Dunne. (CHRISTIAN LAFORCE/File)

It's time for a change in Canada's role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Recognition for our contributions and participation over the past 66 years is overdue. We have been punching above our weight pretty much since the beginning, when Prime Minister Louis St-Laurent first proposed a "single mutual defence system."

In November 1947, as the Soviet Union flexed its powerful muscles, the United States, Britain and Canada had begun secret exploratory talks about alternative security arrangements in addition to the United Nations.

These discussions ultimately included France, the Benelux countries and Norway, and resulted in the North Atlantic Treaty, a.k.a. the Washington Treaty, signed on April 4, 1949. Denmark, Iceland, Portugal, and Italy immediately joined.

After the Second World War and the rise of Stalin's Soviet Union, Canada and the United States recognized the new geopolitical realities with the perception that our security was inseparable from that of Western Europeans.

Canada was one of the very few countries that emerged from the Second World War economically and militarily strong and, with the United States, shouldered some of the defence burden of Western Europe as it recovered from its wartime devastation. The U.S. Marshall Plan provided billions of dollars for European economic recovery, and Canada operated a Mutual Aid Program for Europe, which gave Great Britain top-of-the-line Canadian F-86 Sabre jet fighters.

In those early days, Canada and the United States were producers of security and the Europeans were the consumers.

Beginning in 1951, Canada deployed a well-equipped army brigade group and an even better-equipped air division, whose strength would eventually reach 12 squadrons, totalling 240 aircraft. For a time during the later phases of the Korean conflict, the RCAF was flying more advanced fighters in the European theatre than even the U.S. Air Force and was responsible for the biggest contribution to the expansion of West European air defence.

By 1953, Canada was allocating more than eight per cent of its GDP to defence spending, a massive increase from 1947's 1.4 per cent. During the Korean War's final year, Canada's defence/GDP ratio was the fourth highest in NATO, and its defence budget of nearly \$2 billion accounted for 45 per cent of all federal spending.

In time, Canada cut back a significant portion of its contributions to West European defence because of the massive expense to sustain a robust military contribution on the European continent as we undertook shared responsibilities for North American air defence with the U.S.

Canada also believed that Western European countries could do more for their own defence as they recovered from the war. Europe and its defence requirements were depriving Canada of its ability to focus limited resources on parts of the world where need was even greater and the entitlement more justified.

In the end, Canada withdrew its stationed forces from Germany in 1993, saving upwards of \$1 billion annually. However, Canada still deployed its forces to massive NATO exercises in Germany and Norway and maintained an active engagement in the Alliance. Canadian troops were involved in NATO-led operations in the Balkans when NATO accepted responsibility for peacekeeping operations from the United Nations (1996-2004), Kosovo air campaign (1999), Afghanistan (2003-2014) and Libya (2011).

The Royal Canadian Navy has deployed ships with NATO's Standing Naval Force Atlantic since its inauguration in 1968 and with its successor, Standing NATO Maritime Group One, since its establishment in January 2005.

In the 66 years since NATO was established, there have been 12 secretaries general, with Denmark, Germany, Italy and Norway having the position once each, Belgium twice and the Netherlands and United Kingdom three times each. Despite Canada's leadership role in the establishment of the Alliance and our continuing (and expensive) involvement in NATO operations, a Canadian has yet to occupy that office, and I believe we are past due.

Of the many Canadians who could run the alliance, Nova Scotia's Peter MacKay has the most experience. As foreign affairs minister (2006-2007) and defence minister (2007-2013), he has become a familiar face at NATO headquarters in Brussels and at the military headquarters in Mons, Belgium. He knows the processes, protocols and practices. He has sat at the table to make the difficult decisions about sending our military, diplomatic and aid workers into harm's way to foster peace and further Canadian values, and then returned to Ottawa to put the decisions into effect.

Canada is one of only two non-European nations to be a consistent contributor to European security with little return for our investment. It's high time to finally have a Canadian secretary general who can bring a North American perspective to the NATO deliberations, something that it has needed for quite some time.