Canada and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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Harper's Conservatives are enamored with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Canada played a central role in last year's NATO-led bombing of Libya and nearly 1000 Canadian military "trainers" continue to participate in a war the organization is waging in Afghanistan. Last year Defense Minister Peter MacKay justified a plan to establish 7 Canadian military bases around the world, partly on the grounds that "we are big players in NATO."

The Conservatives' position is a throwback of sorts. For the first two decades of the organization NATO was at the heart of this country's foreign policy. Only exaggerating slightly, Pierre Trudeau claimed that in the years prior to him becoming Prime Minister in 1968 "we had no defence policy, so to speak, except that of NATO. And our defence policy had determined all of our foreign-policy. And we had no foreign policy of any importance except that which flowed from NATO."

Established in 1949, some believe NATO was a Canadian idea. External Affairs Undersecretary Lester Pearson began thinking about a formal western military alliance in 1946 and in March 1948 he represented Canada at top secrets talks with the US and Britain on the possibility of creating a north Atlantic alliance.

Officially, NATO was the West's response to an aggressive Soviet Union. The idea that the US, or even Western Europe, was threatened by the Soviet Union after World War II is laughable. Twenty-five million people in the Soviet Union lost their lives in the war while the US came out of WWII much stronger than when they entered it. After the destruction of WWII, the Soviets were not interested in fighting the US and its allies, which Canadian and US officials admitted privately.

Rather than a defence against possible Russian attack, NATO was conceived as a reaction to growing socialist sentiment in Western Europe. NATO planners feared a weakening of self-confidence among Western Europe's elite and the widely held belief that communism was the wave of the future. NATO was largely designed, as Pearson explained in an 1948 internal memo, "to raise in the hearts and minds and spirits of all those in the world who love freedom that confidence and faith which will restore their vigour." The External Minister was fairly open about NATO's purpose. In March 1949 Pearson told the House of Commons: "The power of the communists, wherever that power flourishes, depends upon their ability to suppress and destroy the free institutions that stand against them. They pick them off one by one: the political parties, the trade unions, the churches, the schools, the universities, the trade associations, even the sporting clubs and the kindergartens. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is meant to be a declaration to the world that this kind of conquest from within will not in the future take place amongst us." Tens of thousands of North American

troops were stationed in Western Europe to deter any “conquest from within”.

Blunting the European Left was a big part of the establishment of NATO. The other major motivating factor for the North American elite was a desire to rule the world. For Canadian officials the north Atlantic pact justified European/North American dominance across the globe. As part of the Parliamentary debate over NATO Pearson said: “There is no better way of ensuring the security of the Pacific Ocean at this particular moment than by working out, between the great democratic powers, a security arrangement the effects of which will be felt all over the world, including the Pacific area.”

Two years later the external minister said: “The defence of the Middle East is vital to the successful defence of Europe and north Atlantic area.” In February 1953 Pearson went even further: “There is now only a relatively small [5000 kilometre] geographical gap between southeast Asia and the area covered by the North Atlantic treaty, which goes to the eastern boundaries of Turkey.”

In one sense the popular portrayal of NATO as a defensive arrangement was apt. After Europe’s second Great War the colonial powers were economically weak while anti-colonial movements could increasingly garner outside support. The Soviets and Mao’s China, for instance, aided the Vietnamese. Similarly, Egypt supported Algerian nationalists and later Angola benefited from highly altruistic Cuban backing. The international balance of forces had swung away from the colonial powers.

To maintain their colonies European powers increasingly depended on North American diplomatic and financial assistance. NATO passed numerous resolutions supporting European colonial authority. In the fall of 1951 Pearson responded to moves in Iran and Egypt to weaken British influence by telling Parliament: “The Middle East is strategically far too important to the defence of the North Atlantic area to allow it to become a power vacuum or to pass into unfriendly hands.”

The next year Ottawa recognized the colonies of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as “associated states” of France, according to an internal report, “to assist a NATO colleague, sorely tried by foreign and domestic problems.” More significantly, Canada gave France tens of millions of dollars in military equipment through NATO’s Mutual Aid Program. These weapons were mostly used to suppress the Vietnamese and Algerian independence movements. In 1953 Pearson told the House: “The assistance we have given to France as a member of the NATO association may have helped her recently in the discharge of some of her obligations in Indo- China [Vietnam].” Similarly, Canadian and US aid was used by the Dutch to maintain their dominance over Indonesia and West Papa New Guinea, by the Belgians in the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi and by the British in numerous places.

NATO propped up European colonial authority but it did so in the context of expanding Washington’s influence over the Global South. Leading NATO proponents such as US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, President Harry Truman and Lester Pearson all saw the 1950-53 US-led Korean War as NATO’s first test, even though it took place thousands of miles from the north Atlantic area. Designed to maintain internal unity among the leading capitalist powers, NATO was the military alliance of the post- World War II US-centered multilateral order, which included the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and International Trade Organization (ITO).

Sixty years later NATO continues to enforce a US-led geopolitical and economic system, which explains the Conservatives strong support for the organization.

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Yves Engler's most recent book is Lester Pearson's Peacekeeping: the truth may hurt

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