

NATO, ESDP, and Transatlantic Security: Where Does Canada Fit?

By Frédéric Mérand

Response by

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Mérand has provided an astute analysis of the dilemma that Canada increasingly needs to address. His analysis of the current state of transatlantic relations, particularly with respect to NATO, and his policy suggestions with respect to the EU need to be taken very seriously. Hence, this response effectively is supportive of his policy prescriptions.

NATO has been very successful over the past 15 years or so in deepening the security of Europe through its policy of enlargement and, however at times belatedly, in dealing with the serial crises in the former Yugoslavia. Today, however, NATO is struggling to sustain its future relevance.

A critical problem is that the US, for the most part, perceives NATO – meaning Europe – as having at best a marginal utility.¹ The transatlantic crisis over Iraq in 2003 certainly was not the source of the problems, rather it was a consequence of long developing, foundational issues that had not been addressed. In spite of recent evidence of improvement in transatlantic co-operation on security issues, such as the current transatlantic co-operation on Iran, these foundational issues still have not been addressed in any substantive manner. The crux of the problem is that the US, as a global superpower with global interests and concerns, does not perceive that the European allies can contribute significantly to the protection and advancement of its far interests. This is particularly so in terms of hard power, as the gap in military capabilities between the Europeans and the US is more a chasm than a gap, to the degree that Washington clearly, and possibly understandably, believes it not worth subjecting itself to the potential constraints that the Alliance's consensus decision making process may impose on its

¹ The following is substantially derived from Terry Terriff, 'Fear and Loathing in NATO: The Atlantic Alliance after the Crisis over Iraq', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, Vol. 4, no. 3, (December 2004) pp. 419-446.

ability to act when, where and in the manner it desires to protect its interests when the Europeans can provide very little military value added.

NATO member states sought to address this problem at the Prague Summit in November 2002, lest the US effectively abandon Europe. Critical was agreement with a NATO mandate to act 'extra regionally' to deal with security problems and agreement to a range of measures to transform NATO militarily. The Europeans may accept a NATO mandate to operate 'over the horizon' rhetorically, but the difficulty the Alliance has had over the past several years in gaining substantial and sustained material support for operations in Afghanistan indicates that many European states are less than entirely convinced that their security is at risk in that 'far away' country. Further, military transformation, which in principle is aimed to ensure that NATO has usable capabilities that the US finds attractive, is floundering. The cornerstone of the Prague Summit transformation initiatives, the NATO Response Force, has not lived up to its initial promise. The emphasis of the NRF on Europeans contributing through the development of niche capabilities means the force is vulnerable to member states withholding such capabilities or such capabilities not being available due to rotation of national units. Indeed, after an initial rush of European contributions to the NRF, today NATO is confronted by a problem in gaining the required force commitments a few years out that are needed to man the NRF. More broadly, the European members have neither the resources nor the political will to undertake the scale and scope of national military transformation – and indeed many do not perceive the need, in terms of their own interests, in pursuing the form of military transformation -- that the US sees as being required. The so-called capabilities gap is not going to be narrowed any time soon; indeed, it rather may well widen, particularly when considered in terms of warfighting capability.

The lack of European military capabilities provides significant incentive for the US to continue to act unilaterally, which translates into it either acting on its own or working on the basis of bilateral or multi-bilateral agreements, much as it did in Afghanistan after 911 and in Iraq. The US currently perceives the Europeans, whether under the aegis of NATO or the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), as providing at best a means to address problems and issues that Washington deems as

peripheral to its own focus on international terrorism² or as being issues that it is preferable that the US not be involved in.³ This is situation that is not likely to alter in the foreseeable future.

NATO is, therefore, a declining force in world politics, both politically and militarily, in terms of US thinking. The Alliance is not about to die, for it furnishes, and will continue to furnish, the military foundation of a peaceful European region, which is no small achievement - and which neither the Europeans or the US are willing to put at risk through the dissolution of the Atlantic Alliance. Moreover, NATO will continue to have a role in crisis management, with this role be fulfilled by the European members at times with and at times without American contributions;⁴ and NATO will of course continue to serve as toolbox of military capabilities to be drawn on in time of need. As Mérand has argued, Canada does need to be extremely careful about ‘over investing’ itself in the Alliance.⁵

It increasingly appears plausible that the Europeans will take on, possibly through NATO or probably more likely through the ESDP, a range of missions and operations to deal with humanitarian and other crises in regions adjacent to Europe.⁶ Canada, as Mérand cogently argues, needs to be willing and able to commit the personnel and resources to contribute to such operations when we perceive as it being in our interest to do so, and hence Canadian military forces need to be able to operate with European militaries in operations in which the US is absent. Moreover, Canada needs to develop a relationship with the EU, and in particular the ESDP, if it wants to be a partner in the

² That the US apparently sought to prod France to intervene in the Congo in 2003 is an example of this. See Felicity Barringer, ‘UN council may request foreign force for Congo’, *NYTimes.com*, 13 May 2003, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/13/international/africa/13CONG.html?pagewanted=print&position=>; and Reuters, ‘France Considering Rapid Reaction Force in Congo’, *NYTimes.com*, 12 May, 2003, at <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/international/international-congo-democraticun.html?pagewanted=print&position=>.

³ The episodic efforts by the US to get NATO, meaning European NATO, to take a more direct role in Darfur is an example of this.

⁴ In spite of my suggestion that NATO may act without US participation, the prospect of such occurring is open to real question. The Europeans certainly prefer ‘in together, out together’ – this is an issue with the occasion efforts by the US have to have European NATO intervene in Darfur.

⁵ The reported announcement by Prime Minister Stephen Harper that Canada would like to take command in 2008 suggests that Canada may be over investing in NATO, via a long term commitment to Afghanistan. See Paul Ames, ‘U.S. Offers to Command NATO in Afghanistan’, *Washington Post*, 6 June 2006. This observation is not to suggest that stabilizing and rebuilding Afghanistan is not important.

⁶ The EU operation consisting of some 1500 Europe troops to help stabilize Congo mission is ostensibly an example of this.

emerging framework of security governance in Europe that extends beyond NATO.⁷ Such a partnership is conducive to Canadian interests, whether these interests be material or normative. Mérand provides a number of sensible suggestions on how Canada should accomplish this aim.

The caveat is that, while Mérand is correct that Canada has a shared cultural affinity with our European allies with respect to ‘norms of multilateralism, conflict prevention, development and peacekeeping’, Canada needs to be fully aware that the Europeans as a general rule can be expected to act for the most part only when doing so will achieve their perceived interests, rather than thinking that they will act out of pure cosmopolitan principles.⁸ Canada must engage with the EU understanding that our interests may not always align with European interests, just as EU interests and Canadian interests do not always coincide with those of the US.

Developing a more substantive security and military relationship with the EU does not mean, as Mérand makes clear, that Canada should slight its security relationship with the US. Our security is inextricably intertwined with that of our southern neighbour, and always will be. As the US reaction to the recent arrest of Canadian citizens on terrorist charges attests, Canada needs to concentrate on dealing with possible terrorist activities in our country, whether these aimed at us or them. Equally, there likely will be circumstances when Canada has common cause with the US in dealing with security threats or crises overseas and we perceive that it is in our interest to act militarily with the Americans, either bilaterally or multilaterally (including within the institutional framework of NATO) to redress these. Hence, the real dilemma for Canada is in finding the right balance between this latter substantive requirement and developing a closer functional relationship with the EU, not least as some European states see the ESDP as a means to circumscribe NATO and the US and its interests. Such balancing may be considered akin to walking a political high wire, but Canada by now should have developed a head for such heights.

⁷ On security governance in Europe, see Mark Webber, Stuart Croft, Jolyon Howorth, Terry Terriff, and, Elke Krahnmann, 'Security Governance in Europe', *Review of International Studies*, Vol.30, no. 1 (January 2004) pp. 3-26.

⁸ On this point, see Terry Terriff, 'The European Rapid Reaction Force: An Embryonic Cosmopolitan Military?', in Lorraine Elliot and Graeme Cheeseman, editors, *Forces for good? Cosmopolitan Militaries in the 21st Century* (Manchester University Press, 2004) pp. 150-167.