

Canada, the UN, and NATO: Context is Everything

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Headlines like "Canada Breaks 50-year UN Tradition" and Michael Bliss's piece "Why I am Ashamed to be a Canadian" [National Post 28 Mar 99] convey the dismay of those who are upset that Operation ECHO in the Balkans does not retain UN legitimacy. According to this perspective, Canada should not be involved in these operations because the UN Security Council has not placed its imprimatur on NATO to permit the deepening involvement of the 50-year old western pact in its own backyard. These views reflect an obsolete, idealized, and possibly excessively legalistic, perspective.

It may perhaps surprise Canadians that our national security policy establishment underwent a similar trauma in 1948 and in 1951. Prime Minister Louis St Laurent and his foreign affairs specialist and later Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, formulated six Canadian foreign policy objectives in 1948: national unity, political liberty, the rule of law in international affairs, the values of Christian civilization, and Canada's acceptance of international responsibilities. At the time, the UN was the paramount vehicle through which these objectives could be realized.

This quickly changed. The UN was incapable of guaranteeing collective security as events in Greece (1946-47), the Czech Crisis (1948) and the Berlin Crisis (1948-49) demonstrated. Flawed UN internal mechanisms and Russian meddling prevented satisfactory resolution of those situations in the UN forum and in any event, the UN had no standing military forces. Consequently, Pearson, St Laurent, and their American, British, and French counterparts proceeded to create NATO, which was established under

the legal aspects of the UN Charter relating to regional security organizations, Article 51. In short, NATO was created and Canada joined it because the UN could not protect Canadian interests.

The 1951 debate on Canada's UN policy mirrors today's debate over the Kosovo. While NATO was preparing to counter a Soviet attack in Europe in 1951, Canada's Best and the Brightest in the Department of External Affairs initiated a re-examination of Canada's UN policy. These men held idealistic visions of the UN and Canada's role in it, but were facing a new reality. John Holmes, Canada's ambassador to the UN, noted that he "had his faith [in the UN] shaken" by the need to place emphasis on NATO, and that this faith was again called into question when the UN went to war in Korea.

Canadian UN diplomat H.H. Carter noted that there was substantial "public cynicism" about the UN because "rhetoric was a substitute for action." Furthermore, Carter "did not think this would have been the case if the public had been told from the beginning that the world organization had only a circumscribed jurisdiction and that its effectiveness depended entirely on the willingness of the states to use the machinery it provided." Eventually, Carter noted, "continuing illusions may lead to a soporific attitude with dangerous consequences."

The Korean War gave impetus to Carter's criticisms and Pearson ordered a more extensive review of Canadian UN policy. The UN was incapable of staving off North Korea aggression in the region. The Americans used the UN to provide legitimacy for a multi-national force to contain this aggression, despite the UN machinery in New York. Should the UN provide collective security everywhere? The fact that it could not, Canadian UN diplomat Robert Ford noted, "could never be admitted." In his view, "the UN should make the gesture of applying collective security, knowing that whatever it did would be far too late." Ford himself thought this was cynical but preferable to doing absolutely nothing.

John Holmes did not disagree. "We are begging the question whether the UN ever can or should be a reliable instrument for enforcing collective security." The great powers will "posses disproportionate strength in virtually any future security issue...this inequality of strength has already rendered null and void the fiction of collective security." Holmes advocated exerting influence directly with Washington and keeping the

UN as a "useful channel to rally support." There were "enormous moral advantages" in doing this since if Canada was to accept selective collective security "it is inevitable that there be some vagueness about our commitments. This is where the NATO technique is useful" since "the grim realities of war may necessitate strategic decisions...which seem inconsistent with the principles of the Charter."

Pearson instructed that Holmes' views be sent to all Canadian ambassadors in the field for comment. The UN Division's Basil Robinson supported Holmes' view: "we should pin our hopes for effective measures of defence on NATO rather than upon the UN at the same time stressing the fact that NATO's purposes are essentially UN purposes." Another respondent suggested that the disillusionment with the UN "among those well-meaning but not always very intelligent men-on-the-street who believed that the high sounding words of the Charter had simply by the application of ink to paper, produced peace in our time and if not cake, at least an adequate slice of bread for everyone."

In the end, Pearson accepted that Canadian policy in the UN would rest on a 'realist' base. There were three alternatives: the UN could be used as a 'piece' in the Cold War game against the USSR; keep the UN in 'cold storage' to act as machinery in the event of a Great Power conflict, or "accept that the UN and NATO have complementary roles to play." The UN would be used where NATO could not, and vice versa.

We have tried everything to limit Slobodan Milosevic's aggression in the region since 1991: diplomatic mediation, economic sanctions, peace observation, peacekeeping forces, 'enhanced' peacekeeping. None have worked. They have merely contained the situation. It is now time for peace making, or, to use that old-fashioned word, war. Yet the same people who advocated all of the failed means now are upset when we have been forced to move to the logical extension of those failed policies to secure stability and security in the NATO Area. I submit that their stance is inconsistent with Canadian strategic tradition.