

Commentary



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A missed opportunity? Why Canada needs to craft a new strategic vision for transatlantic cooperation

Alexander Lanoszka

Russia's renewed offensive against Ukraine is arguably the most significant geopolitical event that has taken place in recent decades. For one, it constitutes the largest ground operation conducted by a military in Europe since the Second World War. For another, given the rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin and the size of the military effort, Russia appeared to have attempted not only a major land-grab, but also a change of regime in Kyiv that, had it been successful, would have very likely involved the extermination of the Ukrainian elite.

Beyond the violence inflicted upon Ukraine's territorial integrity and political sovereignty, to say nothing of the immense civilian suffering that ensued, Russia's so-called "special operation" attacked the basic rules and norms underpinning the rules-based international order. Russia's unrestrained use of military force, deliberate targeting of civilians, and flagrant violations of agreements like the Helsinki Accords and the *United Nations*

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Charter testify to Russia's aggressive and dangerous behaviour. Making matters all the more chilling is how Russia's political system has become outwardly fascist with its revisionist historical narratives, complete suppression of any form of dissent, and open calls for vanquishing Ukraine even with the use of nuclear weapons.

This massive assault on Ukraine represents the most dramatic phase of war that began in 2014, when Russia seized Crimea illegally and destabilized the eastern Ukrainian region of the Donbas. Now, as back then, questions arise about the future of transatlantic security. What is the future of European security? How best to defend the European security architecture against the depredations of a revanchist and nuclear-armed great power? From the perspective of Canada, a country much invested in European security and the rules-based international order, these questions matter. Precisely because the world has become more dangerous, more fragmented, and, with climate change, worse for wear, Russia's renewed offensive prompts us to consider how Canada should position itself in the years to come, especially with regards to transatlantic security.

In this essay, I will argue that the basic philosophy underpinning Canada's approach since 2014 will remain unchanged. After all, Canada has been a strong advocate for Ukraine and for the deterrence and defence measures put in place in the Baltic region by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which Canada is a founding member. That basic approach, backed by both major political parties, will likely persist – indeed, the rationale for it has only become clearer in light of Russia's wanton aggression against Ukraine.

However, Canada has not realized its full potential as an ally to its European counterparts. First, it needs to spend more on its own military to close key capability gaps. Second, Canada should build new infrastructure for exporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) so as to enable Europe to transition away from Russian hydrocarbons. And third, it requires policy-makers to be much more forward-thinking given the changes to NATO brought on by a rising China and the anticipated membership of Sweden and Finland. Canada has missed important opportunities to craft a strategic vision and to deepen cooperation that rebounds to both European security and its own well-being. It should avoid making those mistakes again.

Canada's approach to transatlantic security

Despite being separated by the Atlantic Ocean and having a relatively small population spread out over a large landmass, Canada has been actively engaged in European security since Confederation. Its lack of foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis the UK entailed its automatic participation when London declared war on Berlin and Vienna in 1914, thus helping to make the First

World War a truly global event. Though Canada gained greater independence in determining its foreign policy, it still joined the UK in declaring war on Nazi Germany in 1939. In both world wars, Canada sent hundreds of thousands of men to fight. During the Cold War, Canada retained a strong forward military presence in Europe, thereby contributing to the containment of the Soviet Union.

Underlining these military efforts is the recognition that Canadian and European security are intimately tied. Since Canada is a relatively small country, in terms of population, it has a strong interest in upholding norms of territorial integrity as well as an economically and politically open North Atlantic community free from malign influence and impervious to authoritarian domination.

These basic interests seemed moot when the Soviet Union collapsed and the pressing security concerns in post-Cold War Europe became the flare-up of ethnic conflict in the Balkans. However, Russia's resurgence throughout the 2000s and attack on Ukraine in 2014 reinvigorated Ottawa's traditional concerns in Europe.

Canada's response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent destabilization of the Donbas was gradual and multifaceted. First, it provided diplomatic support and limited packages of military assistance. Second, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) went about training Ukrainian forces through *Operation Unifier*. Third, Canada recommitted itself to Europe via *Operation Reassurance*, which included naval contributions to NATO's Standing Maritime Group 2 in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas. It also encompassed Canada's involvement in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) as the Framework Nation that leads the multinational battalion-sized battlegroup in Latvia (Canada 2022a). In the run-up to February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-fledged invasion of Ukraine, Canada reinforced its military presence in Latvia while stepping up its provision of military assistance to Ukraine, notwithstanding its suspension of *Operation Unifier*.

The evolving threat environment

Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not go according to plan. Its inability to go about combined arms warfare contributed to its failure in taking Kyiv and Kharkiv. These operational difficulties were extremely costly and out of proportion to the territory conquered in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, with estimates of Russia suffering, as of May 2022, over 15,000 soldiers dead and many more wounded in addition to major equipment losses. Adding to Russia's woes has been the unprecedented scale of the economic sanctions imposed by Canada, the United States, and their European allies in addition to the Kremlin's growing diplomatic isolation.

That Russia has been severely weakened by its ill-advised attack on Ukraine may indicate, at least to some observers, that Europe is more secure than ever. Russia, according to this view, will need years to recover economically and to reconstitute its combat power, if it ever does. By implication, extra-European players like the United States and Canada can gradually disengage, secure in the feeling that European NATO has the capacity to deal with a much-weakened Russia on its own. As such, North America's disengagement is all the more necessary precisely because the coming decades will involve an even greater challenge from China that requires a major shift in resources and strategic attention.

This view has merit, yet it risks being overstated. Although Russia is unable to undertake combined arms warfare effectively, it has nevertheless demonstrated its hostile intent towards its neighbours, a flagrant disregard for many of its own international legal commitments, and a willingness to seize territory even if the resident population is hostile to it. Crucially, it is still capable of inflicting enormous harm. Precisely because it has sunk much of its conventional military power in Ukraine, it may yet resort to its impressive nuclear arsenal in order to play games of brinkmanship with NATO countries and to create fissures within the Alliance. This possibility cannot be discounted.



Russia's "special operation" has had its successes. Indeed, the invasion's failures are easy to exaggerate.

Importantly, Russia's "special operation" has had its successes. Indeed, the invasion's failures are easy to exaggerate. To repeat, it did capture Ukrainian territories in the south and east of the country. It did cause major human suffering on the part of Ukrainians, which has served the Kremlin's genocide goal of cleansing those territories of Ukrainians (Zimonjic 2022). As of writing in June 2022, Russia is still able to use mass and firepower to capture more Ukrainian territory in the Donbas region. Yet the biggest military success that Russia had was at sea. Even though it lost the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet and proved unable to hold the strategically important Snake Island, Russia still mounted a punitive blockade of Ukraine in the Black Sea. This blockade has implications that go well beyond Ukraine, not least of which is the potential for a calamitous food crisis that could impoverish and starve large numbers of people, especially those living in the Middle East and North Africa (Zagorodnyuk 2022).

These successes may be small relative to Moscow's original aims. But they are significant enough for Russia to continue posing a major, even existential, threat to NATO members located on the Alliance's so-called eastern flank.

To boost local deterrence and defence, the four Framework Nations involved in the eFP – Canada, Germany, the UK, and the US – have all boosted their troop contributions in their respective host countries of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland. The US has expanded its own military presence to over 100,000 in Europe (Vandiver 2022). France now leads a newly created enhanced Vigilance Activity battlegroup in Romania (Monaghan, Lohsen, and Morcos 2022). Most NATO countries, including Canada, have pledged to increase their defence spending. All of them have agreed to impose crippling sanctions on Kremlin leaders and the Russian economy, although an embargo on Russian natural gas and oil remains elusive. Those European countries outside of NATO are now reconsidering their alignments, with Sweden and Finland having submitted their applications to join the Alliance formally.

Canada and the transatlantic relationship moving forward

The transatlantic community may yet be heading for an impasse with Russia, especially if high-intensity combat operations continue to drag on between Russia and Ukraine in the latter's southern and eastern regions. What, then, ought to be done, and how can Canada contribute?

Canada's contributions to European security have so far been very positive. Yet Canada should not be complacent. Just because the Russian military has shown major vulnerabilities in its conventional fighting with the Ukrainian Armed Forces, it remains an acute threat. Moreover, discussions about the European security architecture moving forward will be highly fluid. Because of its status as a Framework Nation in Latvia, Canada is uniquely placed to contribute meaningfully to those debates, provided that its leadership has the willingness and foresight to do so.

There are three areas worthy of Canadian attention.

The first, unsurprisingly, relates to the Canadian defence budget. As a share of its gross domestic product (GDP), Canadian military spending has undergone a significant decline since the mid-1960s – the result being the neglect and atrophy of hard capabilities. In the past 15 years, there was a slight uptick in defence spending only for it to be erased due to the austerity induced by the financial crisis. Now, in part because of the deteriorating security environment, the federal government pledges to spend more. However, Canada spends 1.39 percent of its GDP on defence – a figure that falls far short of the 2 percent benchmark that Canada has promised to fulfill by the year 2024, which was made at the 2014 NATO Wales Summit. Even with the new spending increases, Canada will still fall well below that threshold at 1.5 percent (Connolly 2022).

A simple consequence here is that Canada continues to leave its military under-resourced and under-equipped, notwithstanding recent acquisition efforts (e.g., the Canadian Surface Combatant fleet). Most of the planned increases in funding will go towards North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) renewal, crucial as it is, rather than defence capabilities that are also appropriate for a new era of great power competition. This includes new medium-lift, heavy-lift and attack helicopters, an established fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles, a new submarine fleet to replace the aging one as it nears the end of its lifespan, and new air defence and artillery capabilities.¹ Canada is even falling behind on its active cyber capabilities (Rudolph 2021). These capability gaps hamper Canada's ability to deploy combat-credible forces and to sustain its participation in international missions. As more and more NATO members spend ever larger amounts on their militaries, with greater capital investments, Canada risks falling behind.



Canada could have played an important role in helping Europe to tackle its problem of being overly reliant on Russian hydrocarbons.

The second area is energy security. Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine brought into sharp relief Europe's dependence on Russia for its hydrocarbons. Twelve of 27 European Union (EU) members depend on Russia for at least half of their energy imports (Eurostat 2021). Although the EU has agreed to ban imports of coal, in part because the adjustments necessary are relatively easy, it faces a much harder task in trying to wean itself from Russian natural gas and oil. Still, the European Commission has put forward a plan – called REPowerEU – that outlines how the EU can reduce its dependency on Russian oil and natural gas while addressing climate change (European Commission 2022).

If infrastructure for exporting LNG had been built, Canada could have played an important role in helping Europe to tackle its problem of being overly reliant on Russian hydrocarbons. As Elmira Aliakbari and Jairo Yunis observe, “despite producing 16.1 billion cubic feet of natural gas each day, Canada does not have any LNG export facilities – an astonishing fact for such a resource-rich country” (Aliakbari and Yunis 2022). As such, it could not have joined its allies and partners – namely, the United States and Australia – in boosting its energy exports to Europe so that European countries can pay less into Russian coffers while Moscow prosecutes its war of conquest against Ukraine. Given the importance of energy security for Europe, Canada needs to reconsider certain regulatory barriers and to approve new infrastructural partners that will improve its positioning in the global LNG market.

The third area is for Canada to develop a much stronger strategic vision for how its alliances operate in the wake of Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine. For whatever reason, Ottawa has a hard time being pro-active, anticipating problems and putting the right policies in place to enhance its position and mitigate the costs and risks as much as possible. Two examples that directly relate to changes taking place within NATO illustrate the point.

The first relates to China, an increasingly powerful authoritarian state that occupies more and more strategic attention on the part of the United States. Although NATO plans to pay more attention to China, as promised in its new Strategic Concept, Canada still lacks a strategy about China, even after intense debates about Huawei and the experience of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor being arbitrarily detained. Canada should be a leading voice on issues relating to China because it is one of two NATO members that has home territory on the Pacific Ocean. Yet Canada seems to be sidelining itself in what might be a generation-defining strategic issue. To be sure, it has announced an Indo-Pacific Advisory Council in June 2012, but expertise on security issues is significantly under-represented and its impact on policy or strategy remains unclear (Canada 2022c).

The second example relates to Sweden and Finland. Both Scandinavian countries have historically eschewed military alliances but have now submitted their intent to join NATO – a move that Canada quickly supported without reservation (Canada 2022b). However, Canada should have sought out to deepen defence cooperation with Sweden and Finland for years already. They are part of the Baltic littoral region, after all, and any Russian action against Latvia or other Baltic countries will almost invariably draw their involvement in some form or another.

Sweden and Finland have been doing so with Norway and Denmark via NORDEFECO, or Nordic Defence Cooperation (Nordic Defence Cooperation Undated). Canada did not participate in the Swedish-led military exercises in 2017 – probably because it would have been too much of a strain on Canada's own under-funded forces – despite the participation of the United Kingdom, the United States, and all other Nordic countries (Swedish Armed Forces Undated). At least since December 2021, when the Russian military build-up and sham treaty negotiations were becoming clear in their security cooperation, Canada should have done more to reach out since all countries have roughly similar liberal democratic values and a strong interest in Arctic security. It is not too late, of course, but Canada must step up its cooperation with those countries, like-minded as they are about liberal democracy and the military-political threat that Russia poses.

Where Canada can yet be forward-thinking may be with respect to Ukraine and its post-war future. After all, Russia's renewed offensive against Ukraine has inflicted massive harm and damage, with estimates projecting that Ukraine losing nearly half of its pre-2022 GDP (World Bank 2022). Canada should articulate a positive vision for reconstructing the Ukrainian economy

in a sustainable and effective manner alongside the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Conclusion

Canada has been an important member of NATO, as exemplified by its status as a Framework Nation in Latvia and its contributions to European security more broadly through *Operation Reassurance*. What animates Canada is a well-founded sense that European security has vital importance for its own well-being and prosperity. Unfortunately, Canada's own participation falls short for what it could be and so it has missed what would have been an invaluable opportunity for strengthening its own military posture, advancing European energy insecurity interests, and deepening defence cooperation with like-minded partners in the Arctic-Nordic space. Thankfully, Canada can still go about these projects so as ensure the strength of the North Atlantic security community.

About the author



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Endnotes

- 1 Though produced five years ago, a Senate report on Canadian defence challenges remains relevant. See Canada, Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence 2017.



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