

THE GENESIS OF NATO

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The North Atlantic Community is today a real commonwealth of nations . . . If a movement towards its political and economic unification can be started this year, no one can forecast the extent of the unity which may exist five, ten or fifteen years from now.

– Lester Pearson, Speech 1948

American foreign policy prior to the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty was, despite attempts at obfuscation, heavily influenced by Canadian diplomatic pressure concerning the creation of a multilateral security agreement. The Second World War unleashed a new international Canadian diplomacy that was both astute and proficient. This, alongside a burgeoning Canadian cogency, allowed Canada, perhaps for the first time, to have an affect on the global decision-making process. Canada viewed the truculent expansion of communism with great trepidation, as it threatened the future of Canada's new distinction. Although the last war left Canada prosperous, any future conflict was sure to be, with the advent of the nuclear age, one of mass destruction. This would presumably have involved an American takeover of Canadian soil, and, with this, a limpid genuflect to the United States. The Canadian desire for a more inclusive North Atlantic pact, therefore, was not to follow the American cold-war rhetoric, but to secure its national interests. Indeed, the United States wanted no involvement in a collective defence agreement. While they were prepared to contain Communism with economic measures, they were returning to their historic platform of isolationism and eschewed any military commitments. The Canadian need to balance the new American hegemony, protect its trading position, and the desire to create an unprecedented deterrent to war, created, with support and leadership from the British, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Once the United States conceded to initial discussions, Canada also had to make the Treaty acceptable to the Canadian people, and, therefore, placed duress on the rest of the negotiators to include an economic article that would soften its military implications and foster international stability. Thus, the Canadian influence on the origin of the Treaty was political as well as strategic.

The American historiography on the evolution of NATO has been dominated by the debate between the traditionalists and the revisionists. Traditionalists opine that the Soviet Union simply ignored wartime agreements and NATO was, therefore, a necessity to prevent Communist expansion led by the Americans. The revisionist view maintains that Soviet objectives were largely defensive, as the Americans were pursuing global economic imperialism; therefore, NATO was created by American policy-makers who simply misconstrued Soviet intentions. The tenability of these theses, especially that of the latter, are replete with defects, as both neglect outside impressions on the unfolding of the security agreement. Conversely, the British tend to claim is that it was purely the mellifluous skill of British diplomacy, specifically that of Ernest Bevin, that was responsible for the final product of western security. This contention also generates more heat than light, as it not only attributes the creation to one nation – but to one man. There were many factors that contributed to the creation of NATO, but there was no other

nation that was more vehement towards the idea of it being multilateral, and concomitantly, that there must exist, for Canadian political and strategic reasons, a non-military clause therein.

In 1944 and 1945, the Western powers were cognizant that there would be minimal cooperation with the Soviet Union in dealing with the problems of the post-war world. Western governments also became increasingly alarmed, as it became clear that the Soviet leadership intended to maintain its own military forces at full strength, despite the Western commitment to reduce their defence establishments and to demobilize forces. The buffer zone between the two spheres, consisting of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria, originally believed to have internal freedom of government, was, in 1947 and early 1948, rapidly subsumed into the Soviet Union. The pattern was ominous: first a government of national unity; then a popular front government; then a communist government; and finally a purge of communists who were not considered reliable by the Soviet government, which usually meant the liquidation of those who had not spent the war years in the Soviet Union. The ideals of equality that had inspired the early Communists had been abandoned.

In view of Soviet germination, the British declaration on 1 February 1947 to withdraw assistance from Greece and Turkey made the Americans very nervous. Now, this may not have been meant to force the Americans' hand; it was simply an acknowledgement of an important fact – that Britain had no more money left in the till. While still a great power, Britain was no longer a world power. Rationale notwithstanding, this left Greece and Turkey open to Communist infiltration and, therefore, the Americans in a precarious position. The Americans had to pick up the gauntlet.

United States President, Harry Truman, decided that the help should be given to protect the independence of Greece and Turkey. In his 12 March 1946 address to Congress the President said, "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." Although this gave the impression that the United States was on the verge of a global aid policy, shortly thereafter a report by the joint Strategic Survey Committee to the Joint Chiefs of Staff stressed the importance that aid must only be in areas of vital importance to U.S. security. The Truman doctrine, therefore, may simply have been elaborate rhetoric, designed to persuade Congress for aid to Greece and Turkey, and that the Truman Doctrine would be more limited than first implied. Regardless of whether the United States was truly committed to economic aid for the stability of other nations, as they clearly were through the Marshall Plan, it was clear that they were definitely opposed to any sort of international military commitment.

Although the question of military commitments was still an anathema to the American Congress, efforts were being made to improve continental defence and the ripples of this crest were soon felt in Canada. The Canadian government, with the outbreak of the Cold War, was constantly parrying with the Americans over Northern security. Canada resisted what it felt were impetuous American defence demands for a number of reasons: ****the danger of frightening the Soviets away from a negotiating position; the primary obligation to and dependence on the United Nations for security; and the ties with the Commonwealth. These official arguments for not expanding northern defence had some merit; however, Canada also wanted to guard its sovereignty from the powerful vortex that the United States had become.

As 1946 was coming to a close, Canada began to realize that negotiation with the Soviets was becoming increasingly unlikely, and, therefore, agreed to a meeting with the United States. The joint statement by the two governments on defence collaboration of 12 February 1947 was a basic document. It stressed general cooperation, exchange of observers, and encouraged common equipment designs. Most importantly for Canada, it was simply an informal arrangement that did not impair the control of their respective territories. It was simply a renewal of dedication to continental defence that the Permanent Joint Board of Defence had begun. Although this was satisfactory to Canada, it was realized that, in order to effectively balance the overwhelming strength and demands of its neighbour, a more inclusive alliance had to be initiated. Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, said in the House of Commons the day of the signing, "The ultimate objective is not joint or regional defence, but collective international defence."

In June 1944, Ernest Bevin produced the "Combined Memorandum on Western Europe" which was submitted to the Foreign Secretary and the Chiefs of Staff. The report was Bevin's first analysis of a western regional security system, and, after the Labour government came to power in July 1945, Bevin's zeal for a Western Europe security group increased. He began to stress an Anglo-French alliance as its foundation. Negotiations followed the Foreign Secretary's lead, and an Anglo-French alliance, dubbed the Dunkirk Treaty, was signed in March 1947. By the summer of 1947, Britain appeared ready to assume the leadership of Western Europe. Bevin launched a plan for a European organization and sent out feelers to General Marshall in the United States in December. What must be understood at this point, is that Bevin did not envision a formal alliance, but more of a collective understanding. In addition, as Lord Gladwyn attested: "Bevin did not at this stage actually propose a multilateral treaty, still less a multilateral defensive pact." Although Bevin may have originated the vague concept of Western security, the impetus for a formal multilateral organization including North America came from Canada.

**** Although many have cited Louis St. Laurent's speech, as Canadian Secretary of State, to the United Nations (UN) in 1947 as the first to express official interest in a North Atlantic pact, the first promulgation of the idea occurred a few months earlier. One of the quintessential espousers of a future North Atlantic arrangement was Escott Reid, then deputy to Pearson, who, on the 13 August, at the Couchiching Conference of the Canadian Institute of Public Affairs, declared that Western nations should pool their resources and accept a binding security agreement to defend against possible aggressors.

As Pearson had given Reid permission to include this in his speech, the Canadian Department of External Affairs clearly operated in concert for a "binding" agreement for a Western "international security organization" that would consolidate "economic" as well as military resources. And this was all two months before Bevin's telegram to Marshall about an informal "understanding."

Before he retired from office, King was conscious of these developments. But King maintained the philosophy of selective isolationism that had allowed him to run the national government for most of the century. Whether King was simply too tired to resist any longer, or felt that it was finally time to give the department some freedom, is beyond the ambit of this paper. The product of this, however, was St. Laurent's speech at the UN Assembly in September 1947, which revealed to the world the possibility of a North Atlantic Alliance. Pearson recalls how he spent

most of the night in his hotel room creating the draft. The key paragraph that was delivered reads:

If forced, nations may seek greater safety in an association of democratic and peace loving states willing to accept more specific international obligations in return for a greater measure of national security. Such associations . . . if consistent with the principles and purpose of the Charter, can be formed within the United Nations. . .

Pearson recollected that they were immediately asked by other delegations, "especially by the British and American," to elaborate on their ideas. It was obvious that international officials were becoming increasingly skeptical about the Security Council matrix. Pearson wrote: "It was not long, for example, before it became clear that the UN, through the Security Council, could not guarantee the peace and security given priority to the Charter." It is significant to note that Canada never fully accepted the concept of the veto, and only acquiesced on the basis that it expected the Security Council would rarely resort to formal votes. Brooke Claxton, the Canadian Minister of National Defence, put it succinctly: "Peace won't be made by votes."

There were many reasons why Canada postulated an international security agreement. Firstly, they, like most Western nations at the time, feared Communist aggression and a war with the Soviet Union. The revisionist perspective, as Pearson has stated, is "singularly unimpressive." He continues:

We did not accept United States Cold War analyses or tactics without examination and, when necessary, criticism. The idea that that we were brainwashed by the Pentagon is nonsense.

By 1947, the Canadian public opinion became cognizant that Canada could not remain aloof to international conflicts, and this being the case, they should endeavor to accept commitments to secure its national interests. This was in stark contrast to prewar Canadian beliefs. The maintenance of unity was always King's primary concern; however, the Communist threat and fear of another war galvanized public opinion to support a more active role in foreign affairs.

Canada also feared damage to its new economic status as what was then being called a "middle power." Canada's shift to liberal internationalism correlated with its new position that entailed an expanding export-oriented economy. An international organization, from Ottawa's perspective, would establish rules and regulations that would inevitably favour countries of Canada's size, especially in relations with World Powers. Isolationism, therefore, was not an option

Finally, Canada understood that the United States had to be involved to make the deterrent credible and to escape the dangers, such as the loss of sovereignty, of an exclusive continental relationship with the Americans. On 13 January 1947, St. Laurent gave the Gray Lecture at the University of Toronto. Among other significant points, number four related to international organizations, in which he declared: "No society of nations can prosper if it does not have the support of those who hold the major share of the world's military and economic power." As the United States had become the preeminent global Power, their inclusion into the conjunctural agreement was a necessity.

On 29 February 1948, Czechoslovakia was forced by the Soviet army to surrender power to the Czech communists in Prague. The first reaction to the Soviet coup in Czechoslovakia came from

the states of Western Europe who, on 17 March 1948, signed the Brussels Treaty; a collective defence pact of fifty years duration between Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Aware that American involvement was not possible at this time, the Europeans created their own enterprise with a careful eye on what was occurring on the other side of the Atlantic. The hope was that this demonstration may alter American opinion, but it is evident by the events that transpired after the Treaty, that they would need more cajoling.

Despite lax support from Truman, the administration was still hesitant of joining a European alliance. They were still reluctant to have the United States undertake the kind of military commitment that would make such a pact effective, primarily because they believed that such a commitment would be rejected by Congress. George F. Kennan, Policy Planning Director for the State Department, who would later become a major obstacle to American involvement in a treaty, wrote in his memoirs: "I was aware of the British initiative and of our response to it. I regarded the anxieties of the Europeans as a little silly; this was not it seemed to me, the time to start talking about military defenses and preparations." The United States simply did not see the situation in the same manner.

The Canadian response to the Brussels Treaty was more absolute. King's statement in the House of Commons welcomed the Treaty and then voiced the key sentence:

The people of all free countries may be assured that Canada will play her full part in every movement to give substance to the conception of an effective system of collective security by the development of regional pacts under the charter of the United Nations.

Canada's full weight was now concentrated on attempting to persuade the United States to undertake something more concrete than a mere blessing of the Brussels Treaty and, more importantly, the Americans were aware of it.

According to official NATO historiography, the negotiations that led to the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty started in Washington on 6 July 1948. It is known now, however, that secret negotiations on a North Atlantic security treaty had already been conducted by the British, Canadians, and the Americans at the Pentagon in March of 1948. One of the participants, Canadian Escott Reid, refers to "the crucial 'Pentagon' talks in March 1948 during which the North Atlantic Treaty was effectively conceived." On 11 March, Bevin proposed a meeting to discuss a defence scheme and that, although he was not sure what form this would take, negotiations should begin immediately. King, of course, reacted favourably and, with the increased tensions caused by the Czechoslovakia crisis, Marshall and the American Administration agreed.

The Canadian Department of External Affairs was well prepared. They had even drafted a preliminary security pact. At the beginning of the first meeting, the Americans lobbied for the continuance of a Western European pact, but with a unilateral declaration that an attack on any of said countries, would be considered by the Americans as an attack on the United States. In short, a simple extension of the Monroe Doctrine. Most Americans, most prominent among them George Kennan and Charles Bohlen, believed that a verbal commitment would both reassure the Europeans and deter the Soviets.

To understand this conservative American attitude, one must be aware that American isolationism was as old as the country itself, and its origins stemmed from George Washington, in an effort to avoid American entanglement in the French Revolution. The spirit of this attitude had not changed, and Bohlen and Kennan merely reflected the beliefs of the American populace. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were also anxious of the prospect of an open-ended security commitment to Western Europe as they believed that they had neither the troops nor the support material necessary to fight a ground war. American strategy, they reminded the administration, was based on strategic aerial bombardment, not ground combat. Thus, the Americans were drawn to the concept of a unilateral declaration, which in all likelihood, they could circumvent somehow, when, and if, the time came. After watching the Americans wait on the sidelines at the beginning of the last two world wars, however, Canada, and the British alike, were not optimistic about a mere declaration of intent.

The final draft of the Pentagon Conference summary report still did not imply an American commitment to defend Europe. In a letter to Wrong on 13 April 1948, Pearson exclaimed: "I am somewhat worried that the Americans seem to be drifting away from a Pact to a Declaration. The latter would, I feel certain, be much less satisfactory from every point of view." The Canadians, who were in a much better position than the British to do so, began to operate through unofficial channels.

In May, Pearson wrote to Hume Wrong, the Canadian Minister in Washington, to emphasize in his private discussions in Washington, that Ottawa considered a unilateral declaration truly inadequate as a basis for real and immediate collective security. The lack of reciprocity would simply exacerbate a European dependence on the United States and create resentment on both sides. Pearson stressed to Wrong that he should also "give them no reason to think that [Canada] would join in any such United States declaration or make a separate one." On 19 May, after another letter from Pearson stressing the danger of the whole affair collapsing, Wrong had Kennan to lunch and propounded the Canadian position: One point was that:

An Atlantic pact would go a long way towards curing our split personality in defence matters by bringing the U.S., the U.K., and the Canada into regular partnership.

Kennan said he was much impressed by this argument, which had not occurred to him before, and that he would think it over carefully. Meanwhile, other events were transpiring that would give Canada the edge they needed.

On 11 May 1941, a final draft was completed by Senator Arthur Vandenberg and was passed unanimously by the Foreign Relations Committee. The result was a Senate resolution that advised the President to seek security for the free world through United States support of mutual defence arrangements to operate within the UN Charter, but outside the Security Council veto. The crux of the resolution, however, was that American participation in any collective security arrangement would not automatically commit the United States to go to war, but would require prior congressional approval. On 11 June, the full Senate passed the resolution thereby authorizing the executive branch to create an American military tie to Europe. While many have postulated that this legislation led directly to the United States signing a North Atlantic Treaty, this ignores the lengthy, often vituperative, negotiations that followed, the influence that was still

needed, and the effect that the secret Pentagon negotiations and subsequent inculcation by Canada, had on the American State Department before this.

As the debate continued in Ottawa took place, the Canadians had made an impression on Kennan. He informed Marshall that a speech made by St. Laurent on 29 April had added "a new and important element" to the problem and said that, "we must be very careful not to place ourselves in the position of being the obstacle to further progress toward the political union of the western democracies."

On 1 June, Pearson prepared a lucid memorandum to tackle the crucial issue of the necessity of the pact being multilateral. He emphasized that the other parties involved needed a commitment that was binding on succeeding Congresses and a new Administration. The pact needed to have the United States actively involved to promote political security in Western Europe before the governments of said countries could successfully attempt economic reconstruction. A multilateral pact would also give credibility to an effort to revise the UN Charter, and, at the same time, reveal that effective security arrangements could be concluded under Article 51. In his summation, he examined the necessity of this for Canada. A multilateral treaty would allow for the defence of North America without the ubiquitous Canadian fears of losing their well-deserved sovereignty to the United States, and, in the future, ensure that Canada was "not pushed out ahead of the United States in the event of war."

On March 31, the Soviets, in an attempt to obviate a unified West German state, halted all traffic to West Berlin, and by the 24 June had blockaded the rest of the city. The United States then realized there was no alternative to involvement. Wrong concomitantly sent the invitation to Canada for diplomatic talks in Washington along the informal lines of the Pentagon talks. Canada's presence at the Washington talks enhanced the chances of Congressional support for an effective multilateral understanding. Instead of the narrow focus of further economic aid to Europe, the Canadian presence broadened their scope into a wider association "not only with European nations, but with a popular and respected neighbor."

The formal discussions began on 10 December 1948. When it came time to discuss the countries that would be eligible for membership, it became clear that the Canadians would have little impact on the outcome. But they were successful in forcing the inclusion of a non-military article that aimed at economic cooperation so that the members of the alliance would not be incessantly quarreling over tariff barriers, competitive currency devaluation, and access to raw materials,

On the 28 March 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty was submitted for debate to the House of Commons. On 4 April, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed, and, as revealed in a press release on 3 May, the State Department confirmed that "Canada's instrument of ratification was the first to be deposited by the signatories of the Treaty."

The legislation marked the end of American isolationism, since it was the first time in history that any such idea had emanated from Washington, and certainly the first time Congress had approved any such move. This departure was, in many ways, influenced by the beliefs of Canada and the actions of the Canadian Department of External Affairs. It was not, whether in the

traditionalist or revisionist view, a divine conception of the United States to contain communism or expedite economic imperialism. After the war, the United States was navigating towards its archetypal mode of isolationism and rebuked any form of military commitment to Europe. Canada by contrast, after four years of industrial configuration and growth, was resolute to apply its expansive character on a global scale. Communism was a credible threat from the Canadian perspective, and if they were to defend their newly acquired vigor – without supplicating to the United States in the process – they needed a more inclusive treaty. This fear incited Canada to promote a formal conglomerate of Western nations that was both multilateral and economic in scope. Although many factors contributed to the ascent of the final treaty – such as the work of Senator Vandenberg to mollify an obstinate American Congress – Canada successfully promoted what it felt were its vital interests. Once Canada helped incite the Americans to accept a multilateral treaty, they transferred their energy to ensuring that it contained an economic clause to ensure that it was more than a military alliance. They did this as they believed that it would encourage international cooperation to prevent the motives for war; but they also knew that this was a political necessity at home to secure the support of its people – notably French Canada. Although Canada has waned in its strength over time, this does not erase the historical fact of its integral role in the genesis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.