

Reinventing the Transatlantic relationship: the US and Canada strategies toward the Crimea crisis

The Transatlantic relationship in the eve of the Crimea crisis

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The Crimea crisis has brought back the attention of the international community to the security of the European continent in an unprecedented way since the end of the Cold war. After the end of the NATO campaign in Kosovo and the proclamation of independence of Pristina from Belgrade, the situation in Europe was expected to be stable and predictable in the long run. Thus, the political and military resources could be safely redistributed to more unstable regions to respond to the new and emerging threats such as terrorism and failing states. Following a June 1993 Rand Corporation report on NATO, the future role of the Alliance was summarized in the famous catch-phrase: "Out of area or out of business"¹, which put emphasis on the crisis management missions and operations beyond the transatlantic area rather than on the territorial defense.

The prevailing idea of the importance of crisis management as a tool to prevent and curtail the spread of the terrorist threat, brought significant changes on the perception of the Transatlantic relationship on the part of the United States. The 2010 US National security strategy² and the 2012 military doctrine "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership:

¹ Senator Richard Lugar, "NATO: Out of Area or Out of Business", Address Before the Overseas Writers Club, Washington, June 24, 1993

² http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf

Priorities for 21st Century Defense"³ have changed the focus of the American priorities in the security field, pivoting toward the region of Asia – Pacific and paying less interest to the Transatlantic relationship.

In parallel with the pivot to Asia, the Department of Defense announced on December 5th 2012, its plans for automatic spending cuts, which included \$500 billion and an additional \$487 billion due to the 2011 Budget Control Act⁴. According to a Council of Foreign Relations report, in 2013 the US military spending declined from \$671 billion to \$619 billion in constant 2011 dollars, which made it the largest decline since 1991⁵.

To confirm the shift of the American security policy regardless of the reduction of the military budget, President Obama stated during a visit to Australia in November 2011 that the Asia-Pacific region was now a priority for the US and the envisioned cuts in the military budget would not affect it⁶.

This shift led also to the plan, unveiled in 2012 by the, then, Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, to withdraw two heavy armor brigades from Germany and thus – to reduce the number of US troops in Europe by 10 000⁷. Despite the reassurance of the Pentagon that the reduced number of American troops in Europe doesn't have to be perceived as a “declining engagement with the European partners”, the

³ http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf

⁴ <http://www.defense.gov/News/newsarticle.aspx?ID=118712>

⁵ <http://www.cfr.org/defense-budget/trends-us-military-spending/p28855>

⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

⁷ <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=67232>

decision was regarded from some analysts even before the Crimea crisis as unwary^{8 9}.

During the first term of the Obama administration, particularly, we have witnessed the continuous effort to reset the US-Russia relations. The missile defense plan, which was launched during the Bush administration, has been modified from its first version in order to placate the strong opposition of Moscow. In 2009 the installation of missile defense components in the Czech Republic and Poland was canceled¹⁰, and was replaced by the European Phased Adaptive Approach, a decision which wasn't well received by either of the two countries.

In return, Russia supported the increased sanctions against Iran and reached an agreement for the transit of "non-military" supplies through its territory to the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, as well as signed the agreement on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons¹¹.

The Russia-NATO cooperation deepened and the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept accorded a high priority to the strategic partnership with the non-NATO countries from the Euro-Atlantic zone¹². The member-states defined Russia as the third most important partner of the Alliance after the UN and the EU, qualifying the relations as of "strategic importance" for peace and security.

⁸ <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/07/the-future-of-us-bases-in-europe-a-view-from-america>

⁹ <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/07/keeping-america-safe-why-us-bases-in-europe-remain-vital>

¹⁰ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-strengthening-missile-defense-europe>

¹¹ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm>

¹² http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf

Regarding the commitment of the Canadian government, the importance attributed to the transatlantic relations and NATO was criticized as diminishing both at home¹³ and by the Alliance's officials¹⁴. During its participation in the Halifax International Security forum in 2013, NATO Deputy Secretary General, Alexander Vershbow, expressed the "perception that Canada is "de-emphasizing NATO, a little bit, in its broader security policies."¹⁵ thus referring to the withdrawal of Canada from two NATO major activities, namely the Alliance Ground Surveillance /AGS/ drone program and the Airborne Warning and Control System /AWACS/.

This corresponds to the findings in a content analysis of the Canadian foreign policy by Jonathan Paquin and Philippe Beauregard about the "low priority given by Canada to the multilateral process of crisis management" as compared to its transatlantic partners¹⁶.

Although the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper defends its military budget, according to a recent World bank report¹⁷, the conservative government decreased the military spending to one per cent of the GDP, reversing the trend of growth and going gradually far below the 1.4 - 1.3 per cent of the GDP allocated for defense in 2008-2009.

¹³ <http://natocouncil.ca/time-for-a-renewed-non-partisan-commitment-to-canadas-military/>

¹⁴ <http://natocouncil.ca/portfolio/the-harper-government-and-canadas-contribution-to-nato-a-fact-sheet/>

¹⁵ <http://natocouncil.ca/25018/>

¹⁶

http://www.psi.ulaval.ca/fileadmin/psi/documents/Documents/Publications/Shedding_Light_on_Canada_s_Foreign_Policy_Alignment.pdf

¹⁷ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS/countries/1W-CA?display=graph>

During the Wales NATO Summit, Canada initially declined to reach the demanded spending benchmark, but agreed later to make a compromise and increase the defense spending but still not formally commit to the two percent of the GDP, agreed upon in the Final Declaration by the allies.

In brief, the leading assumptions which have shaped the Transatlantic relations and the perceptions toward the role of Russia in the post-Cold War world were: first – that there were no immediate risks in Europe that would threaten the world peace and security, second - the US military involvement in Europe could be safely diminished and the attention relocated to other more deserving regions of the world, third – the NATO role would be increasingly transformed into a political platform to discuss and secure coalitions to fight the threats beyond Alliance's borders, and forth – that Russia would not pose a substantial security threat in the future and if some problems arise, they could be solved through only political and diplomatic means and will not require military deterrence.

Is the Crimea crisis a “wake up call” for the transatlantic partners?

The annexation of the Crimea peninsula by the Russian federation and the Kremlin's support for the Russian-speaking separatists in Eastern Ukraine has proven all the perceptions of the risk-free European continent, to be premature and potentially undermining for the security of the region.

The ongoing crisis has raised the question of how vulnerable the European countries are to a possible Russian aggression and to what extent is NATO prepared to coordinate the joint efforts of its members to face the new security threat. After several years of defense cuts, partly

imposed by the financial crisis, the majority of the European countries don't meet the target of the equivalent of 2% of their GDP for defense spending. In fact, only Great Britain, Greece and Estonia, meet the target, and Washington is still accounting for more than 70% of the total allied military spending. Concerns are also raised by the structure of the military spending in the European countries where biggest share is dedicated to social spending like salaries and pensions rather than for new equipment and modernization of the armed forces. After the Summit in Wales and the commitment made in the final declaration to increase the military budgets, some of the member states, namely Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania pledged to gradually undertake the necessary measures to meet the targeted spending over the next years.

But it is clear that as of now, Europe will heavily rely on the USA for the safety of its borders and the protection of its citizens. Therefore, the transatlantic relations and the degree of involvement of the USA and Canada with the prevention of further escalation of the Ukrainian crisis are of vital importance.

During the NATO Summit in Wales the member-states strongly condemned the violation of international law by Russia and pledged strong support for the sovereignty of Ukraine and at the same time launched concrete measures in order to dissuade Russia from further aggression and to strengthen the security of the Alliance in order to meet the newly arisen security challenges. Among the measures were the approval of the NATO Readiness Action Plan and the establishment of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force¹⁸.

¹⁸ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

The NATO members also announced several measures in order to enhance the cooperation with Ukraine regarding strengthening the country's own military capabilities and the interoperability with NATO. At the same time, although NATO reiterated its responsibility to Ukraine's security, the member-states fell short of reinvigorating the Open door policy, referring only to the existing partnership format with Kiev¹⁹.

The US President also condemned the annexation of Crimea²⁰ and in order to translate the political rhetoric into concrete action, the White house launched in June 2014 the European Reassurance Initiative, to address the security concerns especially amongst the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The Initiative included enhanced US air, land and sea presence in the region, reviewing of the American force posture in Europe and the call to the US Congress to approve up to 1 billion USD to support the new commitment regarding the European security²¹.

However, The White house declaration on European Reassurance expressively states that the initiative will not undermine the pivot to the Asia Pacific region which will continue despite of the new security environment in Europe.

According to the document, the pledged deployment to Europe is mainly limited to small, temporary forces, participation in already planned exercises, enhanced planning and surveillance, as well as training of the allied armed forces.

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nato-summit-2014-joint-statement-of-the-nato-ukraine-commission/joint-statement-of-the-nato-ukraine-commission>

²⁰ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/17/statement-president-ukraine>

²¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/03/fact-sheet-european-reassurance-initiative-and-other-us-efforts-support>

The requested financial support if approved by the Congress will represent roughly one tenth of the monthly military spending for the war in Afghanistan in 2012.

Some critics expressed the view that the US response to the Ukrainian crisis is not intended to deter a possible Russian aggression to the Central- and Eastern European countries, but merely has symbolic value and scope. The Republican senator John McCain also sharply criticized the President, accusing him of undermining the American global leadership²².

Throwing its support behind the European Reassurance initiative, the Canadian government has also deployed military ground forces to train with their allies, contributed six SF-18 jet fighters to a NATO air-policing mission as a response to the crisis in Ukraine and a frigate to NATO standing force in the Black sea.

The prime-minister Stephen Harper called the ongoing Crimea crisis “long-term, serious threat to global peace and security”²³ and both -the political and the military leadership in Canada have expressed their firm commitment to the European security through the participation in the Reassurance initiative. But in the view of the planned cuts of the military spending, several critics of the government have expressed their skepticism toward the Canadian participation in the Initiative²⁴.

²² <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2014/9/statement-by-senator-john-mccain-on-obama-administration-s-refusal-to-provide-military-assistance-to-ukraine>

²³ <http://www.ufppc.org/us-a-world-news-mainmenu-35/11896-news-a-commentary-canadian-jets-a-warships-in-the-baltic-natos-response-to-the-ukraine-crisis.html>

²⁴ http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/03/02/canadas_response_to_ukraine_crisis_criticized.html

The main concern though, is not merely the cost or the size of the military involvement of the USA and Canada with the Reassurance Initiative. What is lacking is a long term strategy to deter a possible Russian aggression towards other European countries. The problem is that even an event which was unanimously qualified as the biggest security crisis in Europe since the Cold war, somehow failed to produce a coherent strategy on how to revive the Transatlantic relations and to redefine the parameters of the security environment on the world scale.

Framework of a coherent Transatlantic response to the Crimea crisis:

In terms of political response to the Crimea crisis, the first step is for NATO to revise its Strategic Concept and to reassess the role of Russia and the new security environment after the annexation of the Crimea peninsula which will inevitably lead to a new NATO Force Posture review.

Second, the European NATO members should review and increase their military budgets in order to reach the targeted level of spending as well as to emphasize the modernization of their armed forces.

In the light of the Russian ambition to project influence over some European countries through their dependence of its gas supplies, a concerted approach will be needed which should encompass large scale of political, economic and diplomatic measures.

Regarding the military commitment, a significant deterrent effect on potential Russian aggression could be reached through the establishment of permanent American military sites in Poland and the Baltic States.

It is also necessary to reassess the current missile defense plan /The European Phased Adaptive Approach-EPA/ and explore ways of improving the capabilities and accelerate their deployment.

NATO was founded 65 years ago to serve the purpose of deterring the Soviet expansionism and secure a strong North American presence in Europe as a guarantee for the peace on the Old continent. Since then, the flexibility embedded in the North Atlantic Treaty has allowed the allies to serve different security purposes, sometimes far beyond the transatlantic area. Now, it is probably high time to admit the erroneousness of the idea that the Russian expansionist ambitions could be deterred by only political means not fully backed by adequate military support and to revive the initial *raison d'être* of NATO and the Transatlantic relationship.

The Transatlantic security is, above all, a question of shared values of freedom, democracy and sovereignty of the countries involved. Showing unity, resolve and determination to confront the breach of these values is the core precondition to the stability and security not only of the transatlantic area but of the entire world.