

Canada's Political Stake in Europe

There is another consideration which is often overlooked. NATO has, over the years, served in a tangible way to strengthen our connections with the countries of Western Europe. As a North American nation in a world moving toward continentalism, is it not in our national interest to develop every reasonable link -- political, economic, military, social and cultural -- with the countries beyond the Atlantic?

We had hoped when NATO was established that the alliance would become the nucleus of a political community linking Canada with the United States and with Europe. Had this happened, NATO might have served as the instrument for balancing our major international relationships. But this has not so far happened; and there is no evidence that any member of the alliance is ready to submerge national sovereignty in any supra-national political authority which would represent a true Atlantic Community. In this circumstance, where our national interest calls for the greatest possible links with the countries of Western Europe, are we not furthering this policy through active participation in NATO?

As a small illustration of this benefit which we derive from participating in NATO, the annual meetings of the NATO Parliamentarians Conference come to mind. This organization, which owes its origin to a former distinguished member of your Chamber, Senator Wishart Robertson, is to my knowledge the only institution which brings Canadian Members of Parliament together with colleagues from all of Western Europe to discuss common problems. I believe that the personal experiences which some of you had at these meetings will have brought home to you the significance and the importance of this connection.

Why Canada has Forces in Europe

Another line of argument which has recently gained some support in Canada is that Canadian military forces in Western Europe no longer have military significance and should, therefore, be withdrawn. It is certainly true that the European nations have built up their armed forces to the level where our contribution is relatively less important militarily than it was ten years ago. But does it follow that we could withdraw forces without provoking unintended consequences?

The North Atlantic Treaty and associated agreements provide that member states will not significantly reduce their assigned forces without the agreement of their allies. The allies recognize that members of the alliance may at some time or other have no alternative to reducing their commitments. But, in Canada's case, the normal arguments for a withdrawal of forces would not be persuasive. It is a major requirement for our forces. Our total defence budget as a percentage of gross national product is, in fact, one of the lowest in NATO countries. The number of men in our armed forces as a percentage of population is likewise one of the lowest among NATO countries.