

Trudeau in NATOLand by Chris Westdal (Amb ret'd)¹

The NATO Summit in Warsaw this week is a major test of Canadian strategic security policy, our role in NATO and our relations with Russia. In Warsaw, the Prime Minister will have to answer hard questions his government has so far by and large avoided.

The Summit takes place against a now fevered background, with *Anakonda 2016* underway, NATO's largest war game since the Cold War, with Brexit having just dealt a body blow to Western unity, with Turkey busy reconciling with Russia and with both East and West provoked.

The Kremlin is naturally gratified by all the EU's crises, what now with the trans-Atlantic link shaken, US/UK relations not so "special" anymore. At the Summit, NATO leaders will of course emphasize that the UK is quitting the EU, not NATO. David Cameron will be there to swear that Britain's steadfast. It's a diminished Britain, though, less Great these days – and looking like it might fall apart. Behind the brave faces and bluster, NATO leaders know that the West has been weakened.

At Warsaw, Canada's centrepiece will be our agreement to lead one of four new battalions – but we'll also need to say something about our military spending (1% of GDP, half what NATO's asked for); about our vision of Eurasian security and what we'll do, bilaterally and multilaterally, to fulfil it; and about the size of NATO, especially whether we still advocate, as our last government did, that Ukraine and Georgia join.

We will as well be taking a stand about missile defence, including those new ABM sites in Romania and Poland which are obviously not sited to deal with a threat from Iran – and which President Putin says are "undermining a military parity that has formed over decades." This isn't about the Donbas any more. When we take "measured" steps to reinforce NATO's conventional military capacities near Russia's borders, we play with fire. When we mess with Russia's perception of its *nuclear* security, though, we play with extinction.

So what should Canada do?

Above all, recognize that for the Kremlin, NATO's reinforcement and new ABM sites on Russia's doorstep are inevitably provocative. NATO is not a knitting club. It is a nuclear-armed, congenitally Russo-phobic military alliance that's been growing by leaps and bounds. Turn the tables in your mind. Remember the Cuban missile crisis that took us to the brink of nuclear war – or imagine Washington's likely reaction to new Russian ABM sites in Mexico or on Prince Edward Island, say – or Russian naval war games just off Norfolk. "Provoked" would be the least of it.

Understand too that our armed forces are no material deterrent to Russia. What the Kremlin finds scary in NATO is the vast arsenal of the USA. The deployment of our modest forces has much more political than military significance. We gain credit in Washington and Brussels. More broadly, though – unless we complement our military gesture with active

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diplomacy in a quest for better relations with Russia – Canadian deployment will be seen as more of the same (as in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Libya) from a stalwart NATO ally.

Defence Minister Sajjan gets the point. He says the work underway “behind the scenes” to re-establish a NATO dialogue with Russia “really is the most critical piece ... We need to make sure the tensions are reduced because it doesn’t help anybody.”

To that end, whatever we’ve been doing multilaterally, at NATO and the OSCE, we haven’t yet done much at all bilaterally. Far from “cozying up” to the Kremlin, as Conservative critics keep claiming, we’ve been steering quite clear of Moscow. Six months into his mandate, notably, Global Affairs Minister Stephane Dion has yet to meet with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

If we have anything to say, anything to contribute beyond a largely symbolic military gesture, any vision of Eurasian security to offer and help fulfil, now is the time.