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Canada's NATO Commitments during the Cold War

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CHAPTER ONE

Canada’s NATO Commitments during the Cold War

WITHDRAWAL FROM EUROPE AFTER THE COLD WAR

With the end of the Cold War, many Canadians assumed the forty-year debate over whether Canada should maintain its commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or withdraw would come to an end. They predicted the inevitable demise of the Alliance, as the Soviet threat waned. Some measure of a “peace dividend,” derived from what Canada would have spent annually on NATO, seemed likely.¹

The government’s announcement in September 1991 of its intention to withdraw all but 1200 troops from the Central Front in Germany fulfilled many such expectations.² Estimates were that a gradual withdrawal, suitably cautious, would result in financial savings of some $1.2 billion over five years.³ The government’s promise that the remaining troops would be incorporated into some kind of “rapid reaction force” under NATO’s multinational authority eased the fears of the “Atlanticists,” who counselled that Canada not completely cut its military ties to Europe.⁴

Then in February 1992, Minister of Finance Michael Wilson announced plans to withdraw Canada’s contingent from Europe completely. As Minister of National Defence Marcel Masse explained, “Canada’s commitment to the Alliance is as strong as ever ... The pull-out decision is based on budgetary and fiscal reasons and we have absolutely no philosophical differences with NATO.”⁵ NATO defenders nevertheless reacted to the announcement with disbelief.⁶ Members of the Canadian delegation, who had received only a few hours notice of the change in policy, found the decision difficult to justify initially, especially since Prime Minister Mulroney, only a few
months before, had assured Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany that Canada intended to retain a visible military presence on European soil. The European allies and the American military representatives at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) sharply criticized the timing of Canada's decision, particularly as it had been taken without consulting the other allies through proper channels. But Canadian delegates to NATO and SHAPE in Brussels consoled themselves with thoughts of the significant role Canada's ambassador to NATO had played in establishing the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and lauded Canada's commitment to European security through its peacekeeping efforts in the former Yugoslavia. The idea of according former Warsaw Pact nations associate membership in NATO had been broached by Prime Minister Mulroney in 1991. When the possibility of associate status was rejected - mainly by Britain and France because of the security guarantee it entailed - the Canadian ambassador to NATO worked to institute some kind of NATO membership for the Eastern Europeans under NACC auspices. The portrayal, by the minister of National Defence and minister of External Affairs Barbara McDougall, of Canada's contribution to the peacekeeping operation in Yugoslavia as a renewed contribution to European security was also a source of consolation to the Canadians in Brussels, whose diplomatic efforts were assisted by the high media-profile of the commander of the UN Forces, Canadian General Lewis Mackenzie. Indeed, it was not long before Canadians at NATO headquarters were receiving requests from the other allies, including Americans, for more information on peacekeeping. High-level representatives from allied countries such as Britain and Germany pointed to the maintenance on European soil of troops earmarked for NATO as Canada's most valuable contribution to European security. But in the early 1990s, it seemed as if the sudden shift of interest to peacekeeping might somehow brighten Canada's image at NATO headquarters.

Indeed, although Canada's status at NATO headquarters diminished with the announcement of the troop withdrawal, the general attitude of the Canadian delegation was one of resignation; indications were that the Canadian announcement was a precursor to similar announcements of reductions and cutbacks among the other allies. It was clear that Canada would remain an active participant in the North Atlantic Council, in the hundreds of committees at NATO and SHAPE, and in the discussions surrounding the implementation of the new Strategic Concept. Indeed, Canada's associate Defence minister, Mary Collins, maintained that the Strategic Concept's call for "lighter, more flexible forces," which could "more evenly focus"
on all NATO’s regions, was consistent with the principal themes of Canada’s defence policy as announced in September 1991 and refined in February 1992. As Collins explained, after the troops were withdrawn from the two German bases by 1994, “we will continue to be an active member of the Alliance and our other Alliance commitments will remain unchanged.”14 In addition, NATO’s secretary-general, Manfred Woerner, in February 1992, after the announcement of the troop withdrawal, assured the allies that Canada would meet its other commitments to NATO. As he saw it, these commitments “underline the intention of the Canadian government to continue to play a full role in the North Atlantic alliance and European security.”15

CANADA’S CONTINUING ALLIANCE COMMITMENTS

Many of Canada’s NATO commitments remained unchanged after the 1992 announcement. For instance, the nation could still dispatch an expeditionary brigade group, two squadrons of CF-18s, and an air defence battery to Europe. The government was still responsible for maintaining a Canadian Forces battalion prepared to deploy to Europe with either the Allied Command Europe (ACE) Mobile Force or the NATO Composite Force. Canadians continued to serve as part of the NATO Airborne Early Warning (AEW) system in Geilenkirchen, Germany, and as aircrew aboard NATO AEW aircraft. Canadian destroyers and frigates were still prepared to sail with the Standing Naval Force Atlantic, while eleven destroyers and frigates, one supply ship, three submarines, fourteen long-range patrol aircraft and twenty-five helicopters retained their role in patrolling the North Atlantic as part of NATO’s “augmentation” forces. Canada was still to do its part in defending NATO’s Canada-U.S. region, as well as contribute to the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), the organization responsible for the defence of NATO’s largest single land mass. Last but not least, Canada was continuing to offer the allied countries its facilities and territory for military training, such as those at CFB Goose Bay in Labrador and CFB Shilo in Manitoba, not to mention the underwater naval testing range at Nanoose Bay in British Columbia.16

The government continued to demonstrate its support for NATO through other means as well. The Canadian-paid portion of the infrastructure budget at NATO headquarters, although not widely known, was viewed as a significant contribution.17 The government’s intention to retain approximately 650 Canadian personnel at NATO and SHAPE as military planners, attachés, and representatives on the
Canadian delegation was seen too, as an important commitment. Finally, the announcement regarding the renewal of a ten-year contract to train approximately 6,000 German Armed Forces annually at CFB Shilo and CFB Goose Bay has been described as yet another example of Canada’s intention to help strengthen the Alliance. As for CFB Goose Bay, although aboriginal residents complained about the environmental effects of low-flying jets and it was slated for closure because the United States deemed it too expensive for training purposes, it continued to serve as a training base for German and other NATO planes.¹⁸

Naturally, some politicians and defence analysts continued to discuss ways in which Canada could reinstate, if not strengthen, its symbolic NATO commitment of land forces to Europe. Some members of the Liberal party suggested that Canada retain the Lahr base in Germany as a forward-staging base for peacekeeping operations in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, arguing that Lahr and CFB Cornwallis in Nova Scotia should become Canadian peacekeeping training centres for UN and NATO contingents. One high-level military commander at NATO suggested that Canada retain an “airhead” capability (i.e., a landing area for the Canadian air force) in Europe, and a former Canadian ambassador to NATO noted, tongue-in-cheek, that as long as Canada retained a piece of land in Europe with the flag flying overhead, and at least twenty-five people stationed there at Christmas, Canada’s commitment to NATO could remain credible.¹⁹

Although the withdrawal of Canada’s troops was seen by certain member states, not to mention some Canadians, as a weakening of the country’s commitment to NATO, representatives of the government and members of the Canadian delegation to NATO continued to portray the decision as no lessening of Canada’s support for NATO. As Canada’s deputy permanent representative to NATO explained, the government remained committed to NATO, but would express that commitment in different ways.²⁰ Nevertheless, questions about how and whether Canada should maintain its commitment to NATO continued to surface. In effect, despite the near-disappearance of the Soviet threat, a vocal minority in Canada seemed to favour a further strengthening of the country’s NATO commitments. Proposals included re-equipping the augmentation forces based in Canada for their role in the Alliance’s new Strategic Concept, acquiring new helicopters and submarines to support NATO’s Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) strategy, enhancing Canada’s diplomatic and consultative profile at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and training and equipping Canadian and multinational peacekeeping forces to participate in UN peacekeeping operations under NATO’s direction.²¹
In November 1993, the new Liberal government of Jean Chrétien announced a comprehensive review of Canadian defence policy. By February 1994, a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons was established to initiate consultations and report to the government. In testimony before the Special Joint Committee on Canada’s Defence Policy, some policy-makers continued to argue that the Alliance should remain a priority for both defence and foreign policy reasons. They emphasized the wide array of new conflicts in the world, particularly in Europe; the instability of the Russian leadership; and the ongoing military threat. They advised the government to ensure that Canada had modern military equipment and sufficient tri-service personnel to fulfill the strategic requirements of both deterrence and NATO’s new Strategic Concept. They suggested that the Canadian Forces be deployed and equipped in accordance with the Strategic Concept, which relied on rapid-reaction, main, and augmentation forces. Canada, they argued, must continue to structure and train its military for mid to high-intensity combat operations. In testimony before the Special Joint Committee, it was frequently acknowledged that Canada should contribute to United Nations’ peacekeeping and peacemaking operations, but that such contributions should remain a low priority for the Canadian Forces relative to their general combat capability for defending Canada and its allies. The alternatives, it was said, posed a risk to security and stability as well as to Alliance relations. Some policy-makers contended that NATO was adapting to this new environment of uncertainty, and that NATO alone retained the political coherence and military capability to ensure collective defence and security.22

Others argued that NATO was now less of a priority, given the dissipation of the Soviet military threat and the disappearance of both the Warsaw Pact and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). They noted the unlikeliness of an attack across Europe’s Central Front and frequently cited the historic inability of military alliances to combat diffuse threats such as ethnic conflict, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. Some suggested that Canada should de-emphasize its military commitments to NATO, while retaining a diplomatic and consultative presence in the higher councils of the Alliance. Alternatively, many favoured increasing Canada’s foreign aid and contributions to UN agencies and operations. Related proposals were advanced for new defence priorities, which would emphasize the monitoring and surveillance of Canadian territorial waters and airspace as well as expand the country’s commitment to peacekeeping operations under UN auspices. Calls were heard for specialization rather than the maintenance of a general-purpose,
combat-capable army, navy, and air force. The suggestion was to restructure and retrain the Canadian Forces to ensure a more productive contribution to peacekeeping and to the various initiatives outlined in the 1992 United Nations’ Agenda for Peace. According to the critics, given this new environment, adherence to the prevailing assumptions, practices, and institutions of the past forty years could result in unnecessary risks and expenses.\(^{23}\)

In the midst of this defence review, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Foreign Minister André Ouellet, and Defence Minister David Colle­nette announced the government’s commitment to converting CFB Cornwallis into a multinational training centre for UN- and NATO-­affiliated personnel, the Lester B. Pearson Canadian International Peacekeeping Training Centre. There, the government planned to sponsor training for military and civilian personnel from countries participating in NATO’s Partnership for Peace, as well as from developing countries under Canada’s Military Training Assistance Program.\(^{24}\)

In December 1994 the Department of National Defence (DND) released the Defence White Paper, announcing that Canada would remain a full and active member of NATO. Its thrust was that, although the monolithic threat to Western Europe had disappeared and the principal responsibility for European defence lay with the Europeans, the government still valued the transatlantic link and recognized that the Alliance had made progress in adapting to a post-Cold War world. The White Paper noted, in particular, those aspects of NATO that reflected a co-operative approach to European security relations, including the creation of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, Partnership for Peace (PFP), and the development of the Combined Joint Task Force Concept.\(^{25}\)

According to the White Paper, this perspective on NATO “under­pinned” the future of Canada’s Alliance commitments. In the event of a crisis or war in Europe, for example, the contingency forces Canada maintained for all multilateral operations would immediately be made available to NATO. Apart from this general commitment, the government announced changes to a number of specific peacetime NATO commitments. In the context of Canada’s prior Alliance commitments, three important changes were envisaged. First, Canada would terminate its commitment to maintaining a battalion group to serve with Allied Command Europe’s Mobile Force or the NATO Composite Force in the defence of northern Norway. The battalion group’s equipment in Norway would be returned to Canada to help offset the needs of the regular forces and the militia. Instead, DND was willing to earmark an infantry battalion group to NATO’s “Immediate Reaction Force.” Second, in keeping with NATO’s
broader geographic focus, the government would supplement its one ship in NATO's Standing Naval Force Atlantic with the occasional assignment of a ship to NATO's Standing Naval Force Mediterranean. Third, Canada would scale back its contribution to NATO's infrastructure program and devote some of those funds to the expansion of its bilateral contract programs with Central and Eastern Europe under the Military Training Assistance Program.26

Some later additions were made to these changes to Canadian NATO commitments. The Defence department affirmed its commitment to providing, under UN auspices27 or in defence of a NATO member state, the following: a naval task group; three separate battle groups or a brigade group; a wing of fighter aircraft; one squadron of tactical transport aircraft; and, within three weeks, the remaining elements of a "full contingency force." Canada's prior Alliance commitments were also largely maintained, although the number of personnel serving in NATO headquarters was to be reduced and the training of allied forces in Canada was put on a cost-recovery basis. Finally, the government indicated an interest in pursuing discussions with the United States, the NATO allies, and various other partners on the possible expansion beyond North America of the missile-warning function currently discharged by NORAD.28

Predictably, the release of this White Paper in 1994 did not terminate the debate over the extent of Canada's NATO commitments. Some high-level foreign and defence policy advisers gradually became concerned about the implications for Canada of NATO enlargement. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien had supported expanding NATO membership from sixteen to twenty member states (adding Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia). Estimates of the costs of enlargement had varied widely however, in part because of uncertainty about the number of new members that should be admitted. Nevertheless, in 1997, many high-level American officials agreed that NATO expansion would cost somewhere between US$27 billion and US$35 billion over the next thirteen years. For Canadian policymakers, the concern was whether Canada's defence costs would jump with NATO expansion. Behind the scenes, some senior policymakers began to worry about the looming costs of NATO expansion in the twenty-first century, as well as the extent to which Canada should or could support the rebuilding of the newer allies' defence systems. In the weeks prior to the ratification of the enlargement decision in the United States Congress, the US State Department had concurred with NATO's revised assessment, putting enlargement costs at only $1.5 billion. Yet these wide variations in estimates from such reputable analysts as the United States Congressional Budget
Office, the Pentagon, the State Department, and NATO headquarters raised still more questions about the extent of Canada’s NATO commitments. Might these estimates prove to be too low? Even as the Alliance began to consider “opening the door” to a second round of expansion, various high-level Canadian policy-makers worried about the future cost of Canada’s NATO obligations.29

Another debate in Canada revolved around whether the nuclear weapons states in NATO should demonstrate a stronger commitment to the elimination of their respective nuclear weapons (e.g., by fulfilling their obligations under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons). In 1996, Lloyd Axworthy, as the new minister of Foreign Affairs, asked the House of Commons Standing Committee and International Trade to review the nuclear issue. The minister asked the committee to focus on the various important developments and disarmament initiatives that had occurred in recent years, including the Project Ploughshares Report entitled Canada and the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, the report of The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, and The International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion on the threat or use of nuclear weapons – all of which had added new ideas and impetus to the nuclear weapons debate. The minister also requested that the committee’s study reflect Canada’s alliance commitments, including its membership in NATO, as well as future challenges to its security interests, including the security risks posed by the proliferation of other weapons of mass destruction and the practical challenges of effectively verifying complete nuclear disarmament.30

Accordingly, the Standing Committee issued a report in December 1998, Canada and the Nuclear Challenge: Reducing the Political Value of Nuclear Weapons for the Twenty-First Century, with fifteen recommendations concerning a wide range of nuclear issues. The Committee recommended, for instance, that, during the next re-examination and update of the Alliance’s Strategic Concept, the Government of Canada argue forcefully within NATO for a review of the nuclear component of its policy.31 The Department of Foreign Affairs then coordinated The Government Response to these recommendations, which was tabled on 19 April 1999. The Government Response explained that “as an active member of NATO and a net contributor to overall Alliance security, as a friend and neighbour of the United States and its partner in NORAD and as a country that has a broad interest in (and ability to contribute to) building international peace and security, Canada balances its Alliance obligations with its disarmament and non-proliferation goals.” Keeping these goals and constraints in mind, Canada proposed that the Alliance agree, at the
upcoming Washington Summit in 1999 celebrating NATO’s fiftieth anniversary, to review its nuclear policy and its relationship to proliferation, arms control, and disarmament. The government promised that Canada would “continue to urge NATO partners to consider the impact on potential nuclear proliferators when considering the characterization of the purpose of NATO nuclear forces.” Moreover, the government promised to encourage the nuclear weapons states to demonstrate their unequivocal commitment to enter into and conclude negotiations leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons.32

In a development lost sight of in the media’s focus on the Kosovo crisis, the NATO summit held 23–25 April 1999, in Washington, D.C., opened the door to a broad-ranging review of its nuclear weapons policy. At a news conference on 24 April, Minister Axworthy confirmed the willingness of NATO “to have a review initiated” of its nuclear weapons policies. Explaining that this was the thrust of the recommendations that came out of the report of Canada’s Foreign Affairs Committee, Axworthy added, “It’s a message that the [Canadian] Prime Minister took [to] certain NATO leaders ... I think we have now gained an acknowledgement that such a review would be appropriate and that there would be directions to the NATO Council to start the mechanics of bringing that about.”33 While it is too early to say whether NATO’s leadership will proceed to such a review willingly or grudgingly, the convoluted prose of the Washington Summit communique almost suggests to some that NATO policymakers wish the whole idea would go away.34 Yet it is probably not too audacious to say that the approach of Foreign Affairs Minister Axworthy on behalf of the federal government indicates yet another important shift in Canada’s policy and approach toward NATO and nuclear disarmament. It is too early to predict, however, whether Canada will withstand pressures from the NATO nuclear powers, especially the United States, and lobby hard to obtain changes in NATO’s Strategic Concept.

Most recently, the federal government’s unwavering support of NATO’s actions in Serbia and Kosovo during the spring and summer of 1999 seemed, to many viewers, to be proof of Canada’s loyalty to the Alliance. In effect, the fact that the Canadian government, along with most of the other allies, did not publicly raise doubts and reservations about the decision to bomb Serbia and Kosovo was taken as proof of Canada’s allegiance to NATO.35 However, many questions emerged about the extent to which Canada should be prepared to defend NATO’s bombing of Kosovo, and about the measure of Canada’s NATO obligations in case the war spilled over into the rest of the Balkans. For example, during the crisis in Kosovo, concerns were
voiced about whether Canada should condone bombing a sovereign country that had not attacked any member of the Alliance and that was technically outside NATO’s territory (i.e., out of area). The role of Canadian fighter planes (CF-18s) sent to assist with the aerial bombing of Serbia and Kosovo was also the subject of debate. Questions about whether Canada should contribute forces to a possible ground war provoked considerable discussion as well. Although it is not yet known whether the federal cabinet was internally divided on these sorts of questions, certain comments by Lloyd Axworthy indicate that, as foreign minister, he harboured some serious reservations about unequivocally supporting NATO’s actions in the Balkans. The war in Kosovo served to remind Canadians that NATO membership entailed obligations and commitments that could be difficult to sustain.

In summary, recent debates in Canada about the foreseeable costs of NATO enlargement, the need for a review of NATO’s Strategic Concept, and the extent of Canada’s obligations vis-à-vis NATO’s war in Kosovo are an indication of the debates to come about the extent of Canada’s commitment to NATO. As the country moves into the next century, comparable questions about the measure of its alliance commitments promise to emerge. In effect, the debate has raged for the past fifty years, as efforts to maintain and enhance Canada’s commitments to NATO have competed with attempts to restructure or de-emphasize those same commitments. In reality, the debate has been an ongoing feature of the country’s involvement in the Alliance.

PAST DEFENCE DECISIONS REGARDING CANADA’S NATO COMMITMENTS

Historically, Canadian decisions about NATO have revealed a pattern of shifting, contrasting commitment. While nearly all high-level decision-makers, including most Cabinet ministers and senior advisers, have wanted to remain in the NATO “club,” there has been little consensus as to the means by and extent to which Canada should contribute.

Under John Diefenbaker’s administration between 1957 and 1963, for example, Cabinet ministers initially decided to deploy both nuclear-armed strike reconnaissance aircraft and nuclear missiles in Europe as part of Canada’s NATO commitment. The prime minister agreed, as well, to sign the North American Air Defence (NORAD) agreement with the United States, further integrating Canadian and American air defence forces. Diefenbaker and many of his colleagues were convinced that NORAD should be a North American Command
under NATO auspices. Additional announcements by the minister of National Defence regarding the planned acquisition of nuclear-tipped Bomarc missiles and nuclear-armed interceptor aircraft to be based on Canadian soil were then presented as part and parcel of Canada’s expanding NATO commitments. Other Cabinet ministers and senior advisers, however, were increasingly reluctant to acquire nuclear warheads for the newly acquired weapons systems. In 1961, Howard Green, the minister of External Affairs, opposed the nation’s nuclear commitments, while Douglas Harkness, then minister of National Defence, strongly favoured them. With the subsequent Cuban missile crisis, the public learned that the government had failed to fulfill its promises. A series of related events led to the fall of the government. In the general election that followed, Prime Minister Diefenbaker campaigned against the nuclear commitments his Cabinet had originally agreed to honour.38

In 1963, Lester Pearson, the leader of the Liberal party, exhibited a surprising volte-face as well. Whereas he had previously opposed nuclear warheads for the weapons systems the Diefenbaker government was acquiring, he suddenly announced his intention, if he were prime minister, to acquire the warheads, arguing that the commitments had to be fulfilled.39 “I feel very strongly,” he wrote in a letter dated 7 January 1963, a few days before announcing his decision, “that commitments made for Canada by a Canadian government should be honoured, until there is an opportunity to renegotiate and alter those commitments. This requires discussions with our allies in NATO and Washington.”40 Although Paul Hellyer strongly supported Pearson’s decision, others felt that the Liberal leader’s about-face was at least partly motivated by electoral ambitions.41 Once he became prime minister, Pearson quickly replaced the ballast in the weapons systems with nuclear warheads.42

With the assistance of his minister of External Affairs, Paul Martin, and the minister of National Defence, Paul Hellyer, Pearson controlled the policy-making process sufficiently to ensure that the government was not swayed from fulfilling Canada’s nuclear commitments.43 By the end of his mandate in office, however, he was privately debating whether Canada should maintain a different NATO commitment—the contribution of 10,000 men stationed in Western Europe. In his last few months as prime minister, Pearson requested a secret review of the Canadian overseas commitment to NATO. Norman Robertson, formerly under-secretary of the Department of External Affairs, along with two active diplomats, Geoffrey Murray and Geoffrey Pearson, helped write the review that recommended retaining the status quo.44 After stepping down in April 1968, Lester Pearson said,
in an appearance on an American television program, that he supported the idea of withdrawing Canadian Forces from Europe. However, Pearson was hardly consulted during the campaign for the Liberal leadership and the general election that followed. Then, in 1968, Pierre Elliott Trudeau assumed the prime ministership on a platform that promised a re-examination of Canada’s foreign and defence policy, including all its NATO commitments.

During his campaign for the Liberal leadership, Trudeau had supported the withdrawal of Canadian Forces from Europe, while retaining a NATO role for the defence of North America. After he was elected leader, he declared: “We will take a hard look in consultation with our allies at our military role in NATO and determine whether our present military commitment is still appropriate to the present situation in Europe. We will look at our role in NORAD in the light of our technological advances of modern weaponry and of our fundamental opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons.” Thus, in July 1968, the Trudeau government undertook a comprehensive examination of foreign and defence policy, beginning with the question of Canada’s continued participation in NATO. Prime Minister Trudeau, President of the Privy Council Donald Macdonald, Postmaster-General Eric Kierans, Secretary of State Gerard Pelletier, and Trudeau’s chief advisers Ivan Head and Gordon Robertson were all initially inclined to cut back, or possibly withdraw, Canadian Forces from Europe. They were opposed in Cabinet by Minister of National Defence Leo Cadieux; Minister of External Affairs Mitchell Sharp; Minister of Transport Paul Hellyer; and Paul Martin, leader of the Government in the Senate. In April 1969, after much heated discussion in Cabinet and among various advisory groups set up to discuss the issue, Prime Minister Trudeau and his foreign policy adviser Ivan Head decided to reduce the forces in Europe by two-thirds. When this decision was announced to the NATO allies and members of Parliament, however, it was forcefully opposed so the prime minister and the Cabinet changed tactics once again. This time it was announced that the troops would be reduced by fifty percent. For ministers who were utterly opposed to Canada’s NATO involvement, such as Eric Kierans, it was a disappointing turn of events.

Once Canada’s NATO policy seemed settled, Trudeau turned his attention elsewhere. Although the country’s other Alliance commitments received little media attention during the 1970s, Canada was pressured during this time to increase defence spending to levels commensurate with that of the other NATO allies. In the late 1970s, the government also agreed to provide a Canadian Air-Sea Transportable (CAST) brigade for the defence of Norway on NATO’s northern
flank. The issue that finally came to preoccupy the prime minister and Cabinet, however, had little to do with Canada’s financial contribution to NATO or the extent of the country’s overseas troop commitments. Rather, it had to do with the nature of Canada’s obligations to test weapons systems for NATO and the United States. Once again, a different NATO commitment (apart from nuclear weapons, stationed forces, or defence spending) came to the fore in domestic debates about what should be the measure of Canada’s commitment to the Alliance.

Questioning the extent of Canada’s NATO obligations had its roots in Pierre Trudeau’s 1978 speech to the United Nations Conference on Disarmament. There, the prime minister had propounded a “strategy of suffocation,” based partly on a proposal to desist from, or suffocate, the testing of nuclear weapons carriers – planes, missiles, and so on. In 1979, however, it became apparent that the United States was going to ask Canada to test the air-launched cruise missile (ALCM), a system designed to carry nuclear warheads. The contradictions were apparent, and by the time the government was formally asked to test the cruise, a significant portion of the Canadian public was vociferously opposed to the notion. Many worried about President Ronald Reagan’s provocative comments about the “evil empire” of the then USSR and the increasingly tense relations between the superpowers. Questions arose as to whether Canada was testing ALCMS for the second phase of NATO’s two-track strategy in Europe or for an American first-strike strategy. Within Cabinet, some ministers opposed the testing while others favoured it. As the prime minister privately told visiting Vice-President George Bush, several ministers were expressing their constituents’ concerns that the cruise missile was a technological development that created exceptionally difficult problems with regard to arms control verification. They feared it was a new leap forward in the arms race, with enormous risks for instability in a situation where parity had existed. Trudeau attempted to quell debate by writing a general letter to the public that defended cruise testing as part of Canada’s fair share of the burden shouldered by NATO allies. In the end, the tests went ahead. But the issue clearly divided the government, the Liberal party, and the public.

In 1983–84, in an effort to mitigate his and the public’s concerns about the likelihood of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, and as part of what some have referred to as his “last hurrah,” Prime Minister Trudeau undertook a peace initiative. He visited fifteen NATO and Warsaw Pact capitals to encourage a more co-operative dialogue, while emphasizing the security of NATO
and the Warsaw Pact. As he explained: "We want to change the trend-line. We want to make it clear not only that the Alliance is strong; that it will defend itself; that it will not be intimidated; but that it is also pursuing peace." Once Trudeau stepped down, though, his government’s record of commitment to NATO between 1968–71 and 1978–84 seemed contradictory.

Those who thought Canada had failed to honour its commitments welcomed the Conservative election victory of September 1984. The government’s subsequent Defence White Paper (1987) promised to increase spending and strengthen Canada’s NATO commitments. The general direction of the White Paper was toward expansion in all areas of the armed forces, including growth in capital expenditures, re-equipment of both the army and air force, revitalization of a three-ocean navy, and the buildup of military capabilities appropriate for meeting the continued Soviet threat. Specifically, the government announced its intention of acquiring a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, as well as consolidating Canada’s forces and modernizing its equipment on the Central Front. The government had committed itself to spending $183 billion on defence over fifteen years, with approximately $58 billion earmarked for new equipment. As the minister of National Defence, Perrin Beatty, explained, this "modernization" program would "present unparalleled opportunities and challenges for Canadian industry."

However, the cancellations and cutbacks announced by the Conservatives in April 1989 marked a conspicuous change in direction. Policy direction now moved toward a freeze on defence spending, cancellations or cutbacks on all major capital expenditures, and a reduction in the number of troops. Plans for submarines were cancelled and the number of battle tanks to be acquired was halved. As well, plans were annulled for the deployment of up to a division of troops in Europe.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the Persian Gulf War in the winter of 1991, public debate continued as to whether there were any good reason to maintain Canada’s expensive troop commitment in Europe. The government’s announcements in September 1991 of a reduction to 1,200 troops, followed by notice in February 1992 of its intention to withdraw completely from Germany by 1994, were opposed by a few but accepted with equanimity by many others. The government’s intention to withdraw all Canadian troops from the Central Front, although surprising in light of Mulroney’s recent statements in Germany that the government would continue to honour its European commitments, should not have been entirely unexpected, however, given the sea change in East-West relations,
the inclination among the allies to reduce military spending and reap a peace dividend, as well as the erratic record of different Canadian governments with regard to the nation’s commitment to NATO. As Geoffrey Pearson, the former ambassador to Moscow, has pointed out: “There has been, over time, a fairly constant Canadian withdrawal and return, and withdrawal and return, to NATO, as a centre for our foreign policy. If you looked at the history of our NATO policies, you would be struck by the way that the graph goes up and down.”

It is apparent that the Canadian government has expended a significant amount of money, training, military equipment, and diplomatic energy on NATO since 1949. It is estimated that Canada spent anywhere between $1 to 1.2 billion a year to maintain troops in Europe. Added to that should have been the purchase of submarines, the construction of frigates, and the maintenance of anti-submarine aircraft in order to carry out Canada’s NATO role in the North Atlantic, according to Admiral Robert Falls (ret.), the former Chief of the Defence Staff and chairman of NATO’s Military Committee in 1983. But this was not all. The total costs attributed to the Canadian Forces Europe (CFE) would have been much higher, according to Major-General Leonard V. Johnson (ret.), if transportation, training, national logistics support, administration, and other items charged to other commands had been included. Moreover, these costs did not include the land and air forces assigned to the defence of Norway, the training and exercising of those forces, any maritime forces assigned to NATO in wartime, or the augmentation needed to transport Canadian Forces’ units to war establishments, all of which were included in other Defence Department allocations.

Of course, some Canadians now assume that the forty-year debate about whether Canada should continue its commitment to the Alliance or withdraw ended with the withdrawal of the CFE from the Central Front in Europe. But many of Canada’s other NATO commitments are still in place; the federal government remains committed to NATO membership; and efforts are under way to strengthen Canada’s commitments to the Alliance in different ways. For example, 1,000 personnel of the Canadian Forces continue to be deployed in the former Yugoslavia under NATO’s direction, although they were originally moved there from Germany as part of a United Nations peacekeeping operation. Questions remain, too, as to whether the government should continue to channel significant amounts of money, capital, training, and equipment toward the cost of NATO expansion. Estimates are that the cost of inviting new members such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland into the club could cost non-US NATO members hundreds of millions of dollars in additional
assessments. Moreover, the Liberal government under Jean Chrétien is committed to rebuilding war-torn Kosovo, in part by deploying hundreds of Canadian Forces personnel there as part of a NATO peacekeeping force.

Although the Cold War is over, many elements of the old belief systems about the nature of the threat, the relevance of deterrence, and the need for a strong collective defence organization such as NATO persist. During the Cold War, many decision-makers had conflicting reasons for contemplating—and, at times, changing—Canada’s NATO commitments. An appreciation of Defenders’ belief systems can help explain prevailing thought patterns. On the other hand, a few Canadian leaders rejected prevailing American defence strategy and weapons systems to pursue alternative approaches to managing Canada’s complex bilateral and multilateral defence relationships. New ways of thinking among Canadian leaders competed with traditional attitudes and approaches.