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Leader's Belief Systems and Canada's Defense Commitments

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During the Cold War, Canada’s stance toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was one of shifting commitment. Canadian leaders often contemplated changes in the level of Canada’s commitment to the military alliance, and at times made them, often abruptly. For example, John Diefenbaker’s initial decision to acquire nuclear weapons systems for the Canadian Forces, was followed by fervent debate within the Cabinet, especially during the Cuban missile crisis, and, eventually both the prime minister and his minister of External Affairs came to oppose these nuclear commitments. Similarly, Lester Pearson, before becoming prime minister in 1963, reversed his opposition to acquiring nuclear weapons for Canadian Forces. But by the end of his prime ministership, Pearson was unsure as to whether Canada should retain its Alliance commitment of forces stationed in Europe. As well, Pearson’s successor, Pierre Trudeau, initially intended to cut drastically, if not completely withdraw, Canadian Forces from Europe. The Cabinet eventually compromised, deciding to halve the forces instead. Under Trudeau, Canada eventually reverted to a unique, non-nuclear role within the Alliance. It was Trudeau’s 1978 speech at the United Nations General Assembly, calling for the cessation of nuclear weapons testing and a “strategy of suffocation,” that was followed by his government’s controversial decision in 1979 to allow cruise missile testing on Canadian soil as part of the nation’s commitment to NATO. In 1984, however, in an effort to encourage a more co-operative dialogue between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the prime minister decided to undertake a last-ditch “peace initiative,” travelling the world to advocate an end to the nuclear arms race.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989, many Canadians assumed that the forty-year debate over
whether Canada should maintain its commitment to NATO or withdraw would come to an end. As the Soviet threat withered away, it was thought that the demise of the Alliance was also inevitable. The Mulroney government’s decision to withdraw all Canadian Forces from Germany thus fulfilled many nascent expectations (although the announcement was met with disbelief among staunch NATO defenders in both Canada and Europe). After withstanding some criticism, the Canadian government reaffirmed its commitment to European security through a renewed peacekeeping effort under UN auspices in the former Yugoslavia. As well, the new Liberal government under Jean Chrétien decided to demonstrate its support for NATO – and NATO expansion – through traditional military commitments. Under Chrétien, the federal government earmarked elements of Canadian Forces stationed in Canada to NATO, and the federal government supported NATO enlargement from sixteen to nineteen members. Even during the debate over the war in Kosovo, the Chrétien government was a strong backer of NATO. Although the Cold War was over and the traditional threat from the Soviet Union had disappeared, it was apparent that the Liberal government had elected to stay in NATO.

Today, despite the dissipation of the Soviet threat, the prohibitive costs of NATO enlargement, and Canadian reservations about relying upon NATO’s strategy of nuclear deterrence, most indications are that Canada will remain a NATO member. On the other hand, we can expect that Canadian decision-making regarding the military alliance will probably continue to be dominated by conflicting beliefs and assumptions about the extent of Canada’s obligations and commitment to the Alliance.

**THE UNDERLYING BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF CANADIAN LEADERS**

Why has there been such variation in the support of Canadian leaders for Canada’s NATO commitments? What led some to defend and others to criticize certain military commitments? During the Cold War, these defence-related decisions were influenced by international developments, domestic pressures, and individual concerns. International crises, NATO recommendations, bilateral pressures, electoral concerns, and financial considerations – all affected the nature and extent of Canada’s NATO commitments. Nevertheless, the fact that there were influential leaders who favoured, and others who simultaneously opposed, the various NATO commitments suggests the presence of a variety of underlying beliefs and convictions.
This book’s main contribution to the debate is its revelation that two competing belief systems — typified by the labels “Defenders” and “Critics” — significantly influenced defence decision-making between 1957 and 1989. The evidence demonstrates that the government’s controversial stance toward NATO during the Cold War stemmed from new ways of thinking about everything from the nature of the threat to the suitability of a nuclear deterrence strategy. This new way of thinking first appeared around the time of the Cuban missile crisis, during Prime Minister Diefenbaker’s tenure. It was not always logical or “rational,” but it was embedded in a related set of assumptions that will be referred to here as typical of “Critics.” It was, moreover, a Weltanschaung reflected later in the approach and policy direction of the Trudeau government. What was interesting and novel about the competing belief systems of Defenders and Critics?

Behind the scenes, decision-makers who possessed beliefs typical of “Defenders” feared the consequences of Canada deserting its NATO allies and then finding itself abandoned in turn. Their fears grew out of a perception that the close ties among the allies were in danger of weakening, as well as a concern that the Canadian government was leaning toward neglecting its allies, which could lead to a wide array of unpleasant consequences. In contrast, other decision-makers, those with belief systems more typical of Critics, were preoccupied with the dangers of entrapment, including suspicions about the likelihood and possible consequences of the allies drawing Canada into an armed confrontation. They also had serious doubts about American undertakings. Whereas Defenders believed that Canada should maintain its support for NATO, by modernizing its military equipment, strengthening Canadian Forces overseas, and increasing defence spending, Critics sought to restructure and limit Canada’s support for specific NATO commitments. Defenders perceived an opportunistic and aggressive threat to the Alliance from the Soviet Union; Critics argued that such fears were exaggerated and based on an inaccurate assessment of political realities. While Defenders assumed that Canada and the Alliance’s weapons systems were necessary and non-threatening, Critics saw aspects of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact’s arsenals as overly threatening. And while Defenders expressed their faith in different permutations of deterrence strategy, Critics often expressed concern about this doctrine and offered conditional support for it, at best. Indeed, some leaders shifted from one belief system to another as they learned more about the effects of nuclear weapons and the problems with deterrence strategy.

Thus, different belief systems led some influential decision-makers to press the government to maintain, if not strengthen, its NATO
contributions, and others to seek a restructuring and de-emphasis of some of Canada's commitments to the Alliance. Due in large part to the presence of these opposing belief systems within the inner circles of high-level decision-making, Canada's approach to the Alliance and its NATO commitments often fluctuated and was frequently criticized. This study uncovers a new and original way of thinking about security that was typical of daring "Critics" such as Howard Green, John Diefenbaker, Norman Robertson, Pierre Trudeau, Donald Macdonald, Eric Kierans, Ivan Head, and Paul McRae – and that contributed greatly to the Canadian government's controversial stance toward NATO.

THE BELIEF SYSTEMS OF DEFENDERS AND CRITICS: GENERAL PATTERNS FROM 1963 TO 1989

Chapters 3 and 4 consider whether belief systems typical of Defenders and Critics influenced decision-making regarding a variety of NATO commitments between 1963 and 1989. In doing so, I demonstrate that many high-level policy-makers interpreted events and developments differently because of contrasting core beliefs and assumptions related to the dangers of abandonment or entrapment, the source and salience of the threat, and the merits or demerits of the Alliance's weapons and strategy. Owing in large measure to the presence of these different beliefs among policy-makers, some leaders recommended maintaining or increasing particular NATO obligations, while others recommended decreasing or cutting selected commitments. Although a wide variety of other factors could have played a role in affecting defence decision-making, these chapters indicate that two distinct belief structures helped shape high-level discourse between 1963 and 1989. These chapters, in particular, show that competition between these beliefs significantly affected defence decision-making regarding Canada's overseas troop contributions to NATO.

A HISTORICAL CASE-STUDY, 1957–1963

I have included a case-study in order to show that, beginning in the late 1950s, certain influential decision-makers in the Diefenbaker administration espoused new beliefs and ways of thinking. The purpose of focusing on this period is to demonstrate the two belief systems that shaped and constrained the decision-making process as it related to fulfilling, or not fulfilling, Canada's nuclear commitments to the Alliance. The case study shows that, within the inner circle of
defence decision-making, some policy-makers held belief systems typical of Defenders, which led them during their terms in office to advocate the acquisition of the nuclear weapons to fulfill Canada’s NATO commitments. But beliefs typical of Critics prompted other influential decision-makers between 1959 and 1963 to oppose that policy. As for Prime Minister Diefenbaker himself, his belief system gradually changed from that of a Defender to that of a Critic. This shift accounted for his initial advocacy of the nuclear commitment, his subsequent vacillation and search for options, and his eventual outright rejection of the nuclear systems. Thus, the evidence of this case study demonstrates that, owing to the onset of new ways of thinking critically, the defence policy-making process between 1957 and 1963 was significantly reshaped and constrained, thus contributing to Canada’s shifting commitment to NATO.

THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFRONTATION:
REASONS FOR DEFENDERS’ AND CRITICS’ COMPETING BELIEF SYSTEMS

The final chapter explores possible explanations for the predominance of these belief systems during the Cold War. Since certain patterns of thought were repeatedly evident, this chapter analyses the roots of those beliefs – what might be called their antecedent causes. Like peeling layers from an onion, this chapter delves ever deeper into the question, exploring the roots of the two competing belief systems. It reveals that the principal elements of these two belief systems stemmed from various personal experiences and human characteristics, different historical lessons learned and absorbed, contrasting images about the source and salience of the threat, as well as alternative ways of approaching problems and participating in shared practices. By exploring some of the underlying reasons leaders advocated change, or consistency, with respect to Canada’s past role in NATO, this section tries to deepen our understanding of the factors that have shaped past Canadian defence policy – and to broaden our appreciation of the various types of factors that could, in the future, shape Canadian policy in NATO.

LEADERS’ BELIEF SYSTEMS AFFECT CANADIAN DEFENCE COMMITMENTS

By explaining some of the reasons Canadian leaders sought to increase, maintain, or decrease Canada’s past commitments, we should be better able to understand some of the chief influences that
have shaped Canadian defence policy-making. Although this country was a founding member of the Atlantic Alliance, controversy continued to focus on the exact nature and extent of Canada's military commitments to NATO. This book asks why such a variation in support for some of Canada's NATO commitments have persisted among influential Canadian decision-makers. What were the underlying beliefs of these decision-makers that led some to defend and others to criticize select NATO commitments? Perhaps by documenting, within a conceptual framework, many of the underlying ideas and convictions that influenced past high-level discussions about Canada's NATO involvement, we can enhance our understanding of defence decision-making and Canada's support, or lack thereof, for select NATO initiatives.