

Canadian NATO
Parliamentary Association



Association parlementaire
canadienne de l'OTAN

Report of the Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association

19th Annual Parliamentary Transatlantic Forum

Washington, D.C, United States of America

From December 9 to 11, 2019

Report

The Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association, Canada's delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA), has the honour to present its report on the 19th annual Parliamentary Transatlantic Forum (the Forum), held in Washington, D.C. from 9-11 December 2019. Canada was represented at the Forum by the Hon. Pierre-Hugues Boisvenu, Senator; the Hon. Gwen Boniface, Senator; the Hon. Pierre J. Dalphond, Senator; and the Hon. Josée Forest-Niesing, Senator. The Delegation was accompanied by Mr. Jean-François Pagé, Association Secretary, and Mr. James Lee, Association Advisor.

The objective of the annual Forum in Washington, which was first held in 2001, is to explore the state of transatlantic relations, and help identify ways to address divergences. It is hosted by the National Defense University and co-sponsored by the Atlantic Council of the United States. The Forum was attended by delegates from 23 NATO member countries and North Macedonia – which is in the process of joining the Alliance – as well as two non-NATO European Union (EU) countries. Delegates heard from and had the opportunity to question United States (U.S.) administration officials, members of Congress, think tank experts and academics. The proceedings of the Forum were conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

Before participating in the Forum, Canadian delegates first met with officials at Canada's embassy in Washington, D.C., where they were briefed on and discussed NATO-related issues, as well as bilateral Canada–U.S. ones.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

The year 2019 marked the 70th anniversary of NATO and the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, leading some observers to reflect on how the Alliance had successfully evolved throughout the decades. However, that year also saw tensions among allies, notably over defence spending and “burden-sharing,” as well as a perceived lack of consultation, coordination and cohesion within the Alliance. For instance, U.S. President Donald Trump had been critical of the Alliance in recent years, and in October 2019 announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria without consulting allies. Soon after, French President Emmanuel Macron suggested in an [interview](#) with *The Economist* magazine that, without the ability to count on the U.S., allies were experiencing the “brain death” of NATO.

At a meeting in London on 3-4 December 2019 – one week before the– NATO Heads of State and Government addressed key issues on the Alliance's agenda. In their [London Declaration](#), the leaders reaffirmed “the enduring transatlantic bond between Europe and North America,” noted that progress had been made on increasing non-U.S. defence spending over the past five years and recommitted to strengthening their individual and collective capacity to resist all forms of attack. They also stated that “solidarity, unity and cohesion” were cornerstone principles of the Alliance and invited the Secretary General of NATO to develop a proposal for a forward-looking reflection process to “further

strengthen NATO's political dimension including consultation." (This process was soon renamed "NATO 2030.") Finally, the leaders addressed China for the first time in a declaration. They stated that "[w]e recognize that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."

During the Forum, Canadian and other delegates attended 11 sessions on a wide range of topics that underlined the important role NATO plays in our collective defence and security and in facilitating frank dialogue among Allies. Topics of discussion included: Transatlantic Relations; Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control; Iran and the Broader Middle East; Russia and Ukraine; Challenges in the Far East; Afghanistan; and the U.S. Domestic Political Situation. The following sections summarize key points of the discussions under these topics.

Transatlantic Relations

The continuing importance of transatlantic relations was a key theme of the Forum. Despite differences over the decades, strong transatlantic relations between North America and Europe have been key to NATO's success, and it was emphasized at the Forum that they will remain crucial in the future. Yet delegates were also reminded that these relations cannot be taken for granted. Delegates were told that the U.S. Congress has maintained strong bipartisan support for NATO, as shown in 2019 by the facts that the Speaker of the House of Representatives participated in NATO PA meetings in February, and that the Alliance's Secretary General was invited to address a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress in April. While some European Allies advocated at the Forum for more European defence capacity as well as greater strategic autonomy, it was emphasized that the key would be to achieve these in a balanced and complementary way that strengthens rather than weakens the Alliance.

Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control

At their London meeting, NATO leaders stated that "[a]s long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. We are fully committed to the preservation and strengthening of effective arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation, taking into account the prevailing security environment."

Russia has been modernizing its military forces in recent years, including its nuclear ones. In 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that it was developing a range of new nuclear systems that were mostly designed to circumvent U.S. missile defences, and which delegates were told could be destabilizing.

Several delegates noted that the Trump administration had withdrawn from the U.S.–Russia Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that had been important for European security. It was also noted that the administration had not committed to extending the U.S.–Russia Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which has provided a degree of certainty about nuclear arsenals, and is due to expire in early 2021. The Trump Administration argues that arms control can only work if all parties respect their commitments, and that Russia violated these in the case of the INF Treaty. It further argues that the next generation of nuclear arms control should expand beyond the traditional bilateral U.S.–Russia focus on strategic weapons to cover all their nuclear

warheads, and should also expand to include China, which has a much smaller nuclear arsenal, but is quickly increasing its capabilities. These and other arguments were raised by presenters and delegates during the Forum.

Iran and the Broader Middle East

The situation in the broader Middle East was a major theme at the Forum. Delegates were told that this was a region with serious instability, and that while the destruction of the DAESH caliphate in Syria and Iraq was a positive development, the terrorist threat to the region, and to NATO countries, would continue.

Presenters noted that the Arab Spring and its aftereffects had played out badly in the region, and the Arab world was described by one presenter as “essentially broken and angry.” It was also stated that there has been an important power shift in recent years, with traditional Arab regional powers Iraq, Syria and Egypt playing lesser roles because of internal crises, and states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Israel playing greater ones. Delegates were told that the situation in Syria is tremendously complex, and there is no obvious end state in sight. The crisis in that country was also an example of the way in which empty and poorly governed spaces in the region had allowed non-state actors such as DEASH to flourish.

In terms of U.S. engagement, although some observers saw the Obama Administration’s “pivot” toward Asia as also being a pivot away from the Middle East, the U.S. continues to be engaged there, notably in the Gulf. One expert stated that the U.S. conundrum is that it cannot transform the Middle East, but also cannot leave it. At the same time, U.S. interests in the region have decreased over time as it becomes less dependent on imported oil, and both the Obama and Trump administrations concluded that the war in Syria, for example, was not a U.S. priority. The U.S. is also no longer attempting to play a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, which, in any event, delegates were told is no longer central to the region.

Delegates heard that relations with Iran have become more difficult following the Trump Administration’s decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and reimpose sanctions on Iran. Although delegates were told that some European states have worked to preserve the deal and to continue doing business with Iran, this has proven difficult because of U.S. sanctions. It was asserted that, despite strong rhetoric, the Trump Administration does not appear to want a military confrontation with Iran, even after that state has demonstrated its ability and willingness to attack oil infrastructure in the Gulf and take other destabilizing actions. For its part, delegates were reminded that Iran faces a number of challenges, including external ones, such as its mainly political as opposed to religious rivalry with Saudi Arabia. It also faces important domestic challenges, including economic and social ones that are exacerbated by sanctions, as well as a coming succession.

Russia and Ukraine

Delegates were told that relations between Russia and the West were at their lowest point in 30 years. Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014 and ongoing destabilization of its Donbas region had led NATO to refocus on defence and deterrence in Europe. At their London meeting a week before the Forum, NATO leaders stated that

“Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security.” Although Russia has shown no willingness to discuss the annexation of Crimea, one delegate at the Forum underlined that Soviet control of the Baltic states, which had not been recognized by many countries in the West, did eventually end. NATO allies have worked together well on both defence and sanctions against Russia. Although some delegates argued the need for greater interaction with that country, more contended that Russia’s ongoing actions were preventing meaningful dialogue.

NATO allies have strongly supported Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, including through assistance with defence and other reforms. Delegates were told by one expert that while Ukraine has done very well on reforms overall, more still needed to be done in areas such as the judiciary, rule of law and property rights. In 2019, Ukraine elected a new president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. On the day the Forum opened, President Zelenskyy met with Russian President Putin in Paris at a summit of the Normandy Four – Ukraine, Russia, Germany, France – which has been attempting to support the resolution of conflict in the Donbas, and last met in 2016. It was suggested at the Forum that unjustified criticism of Ukraine by President Trump for domestic political purposes might weaken the negotiating position of that country’s new president with Russia.

Challenges in the Far East

Delegates were told that U.S. strategic documents define the Indo-Pacific region as a priority, and that the Trump Administration has focused its attention in that region on economic competition with China and on the security challenge posed by North Korea. Its approach in both cases has been unilateral.

China has an authoritarian regime, but is also deeply integrated into the global economy and is perceived in Asia to be displacing the U.S. economically. It was stressed at the Forum that like-minded states should work together to deal with China. While the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade negotiations would have provided the U.S. with some diplomatic and economic leverage in its competition with China, delegates were told that the Trump Administration withdrew from those negotiations, and has instead focused on imposing tariffs on Chinese goods in a bid to secure a preliminary, or “phase one,” trade agreement with that country.

In terms of North Korea, delegates were told that Kim Jong Un was young and relatively unknown when he took over as that country’s leader at the end of 2011. In the years that followed, delegates heard that he doubled down on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, which many observers argue he believes are essential for the regime’s survival. Tension between the U.S. and North Korea reached a head in 2017, before the next years saw a turn to bilateral diplomacy between them. One expert at the Forum stated that little had been accomplished, however, except for the marginalization of traditional U.S. allies on North Korea such as South Korea, Japan and Europe. Delegates also heard that China has worked to avoid being marginalized and has maintained contact with North Korea.

Afghanistan

U.S. and NATO forces have been fighting in Afghanistan for almost 20 years, and President Trump has signalled his desire to withdraw American forces from what has

become the U.S.'s longest war. Although delegates were told that the strength of the Taliban is often exaggerated, as it controls sparsely populated rural terrain but no cities or provincial capitals, the U.S. government has been engaged in negotiations with it for several years. The year 2019 reportedly saw a draft agreement in principle between the U.S. and the Taliban that would see a Taliban commitment not to support international terrorism in exchange for the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country. It was expected that this would be followed by intra-Afghan negotiations on a ceasefire and a political solution to the conflict. Although negotiations with the Taliban were suspended in September 2019, just weeks before the Forum President Trump announced that they had restarted. A U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would raise questions about the future of the NATO-led train, advise and assist mission in that country. One expert at the Forum was also pessimistic that a peace agreement could be negotiated that would not simply amount to a victory for the Taliban.

The U.S. Domestic Political Situation

The Forum took place at a key point in U.S. domestic politics, during the impeachment of U.S. President Donald Trump and less than a year before the 2020 U.S. elections; One presenter began by welcoming delegates to Washington D.C., “the entertainment capital of the world.”

It was stated at the Forum that political polarization, which had been evident before President Trump's election, was now even more flagrant, with older traditions of “big tent” parties and working “across the aisle” increasingly replaced by tribalism. Delegates were told that President Trump has doubled down on this polarization, using social media posts and allegations of “fake news” to maintain the support of his political base. It was asserted that the current impeachment of the president as a result of his actions in relation to Ukraine was likely to proceed on a partisan basis, with few Republicans voting for it in either the House or the Senate.

Delegates were told that the presidential election in 2020 will likely depend on results in only a few competitive states. It was stated that President Trump will have several advantages, including a strong economy and the fact that Democrats will engage in months of infighting as they choose their nominee. According to one expert at the Forum, the biggest disadvantage President Trump has is himself. Although foreign policy is usually less important in U.S. elections than domestic issues, delegates were told that President Trump will take credit for the fact that other NATO allies have increased their defence spending during his administration. Delegates were also told that, should the Democratic Party choose Joe Biden as its nominee, foreign policy would be more of an issue in the election. One presenter stated that if President Trump loses the election, he will likely challenge the result in the courts.

The annual Parliamentary Transatlantic Forum is a valuable opportunity for NATO PA delegates to hear about American priorities while also reaffirming the importance of transatlantic relations and dialogue between North America and Europe. Given the importance to Canada of both the U.S. and of transatlantic relations, the meeting offered Canadian delegates the opportunity to participate in current debates and advance Canadian interests.

Respectfully submitted,

Ms. Karen McCrimmon OMM, CD, MP
Chair of the Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association
ACTIVITY	19th Annual Parliamentary Transatlantic Forum
DESTINATION	Washington, D.C., United States of America
DATES	From December 9 to 11, 2019
DELEGATION	
	Hon. Pierre-Hugues Boisvenu
SENATE	Hon. Gwen Boniface
	Hon. Pierre J. Dalphond
	Hon. Josée Forest-Niesing
HOUSE OF COMMONS	
STAFF	Jean-François Pagé
	James Lee
TRANSPORTATION	\$ 7,513.95
ACCOMMODATION	\$ 7,812.18
HOSPITALITY	\$ 0.00
PER DIEMS	\$ 2,848.11
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$ 0.00
MISCELLANEOUS	\$ 1,292.55
TOTAL	\$ 19,466.79