

UN, NATO failures require new ways of defence thinking

By Bob Bergen

What are Canadians supposed to make of North Korea's nuclear detonation last week?

What are Canadians supposed to make of North Atlantic Treaty Organization's failure to provide the troops necessary to win the war against insurgents in Afghanistan?

These are two troubling questions confronting Canadian foreign affairs and defence policy thinkers and the answers are chilling.

In the first case, Korea's nuclear test explosion Oct. 9 is evidence the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) are a sad joke. North Korea agreed to NPT safeguards in 1992, but since 1993 the IAEA hasn't been able to verify the safeguards were ever followed.

North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 and now it has gone nuclear.

Further, the IAEA has never had full access to Iran's nuclear facilities and was ineffective in stopping India and Pakistan from obtaining nuclear weapons, while nuclear-armed Israel has refused to sign the NPT.

Now we are faced with the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons to Japan, Egypt and Syria and into the hands of terrorists at some dark point in the future.

That is an utter failure of the UN agency's ability to do its job and is reminiscent of the failure of the idealistic but-doomed League of Nations to contain German, Italian and Japanese aggression which led to the Second World War.

Then there is NATO, which Canada has been a member of since 1949 and which showed its worth during the Cold War.

NATO was thought to be transforming and expanding itself in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise in 1991.

For example, NATO's bombing of Bosnian Serbs saved hapless United Nations peacekeepers from humiliation when they failed to protect Muslim refugees in Srebrenica and around Sarajevo in 1995 and it demonstrated it could be a powerful force in the rebuilding of Europe.

NATO warplanes – Canadians among them – later bombed Slobodan Milosevic's Serb military into submission over 78 days in 1999 and put an end to ethnic cleansing of ethnic Muslim Albanians in Kosovo.

Then, on September 12, 2001 – the day after al-Qaeda terrorists flew hijacked airliners into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon – NATO's North Atlantic Council invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time.

Article 5 is the collective security cornerstone of NATO's Raison D'être that an attack on one NATO member in Europe or North America is an attack against all.

That's why Canada responded with 16 warships to a NATO coalition fleet from October 2001 to July 2003 in Operation Apollo in the Arabian Gulf.

That's why Canada responded in 2002 sending a battle group to the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, which was home to the Taliban who sheltered Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

That is why more than 2,000 Canadians are slogging it out and dying in ever increasing numbers in Operation Medusa, Canada's contribution to an expanded NATO mission based out of Kandahar against terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan's south.

But, the situation in Afghanistan is deeply disturbing.

According to Canadian Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, NATO members and non-members from some 37 countries pledged to commit an additional 2,000 troops to the southern Afghan campaign. Eighteen months later, those troops are nowhere to be seen.

Even worse, of all the NATO troops in Afghanistan it is only Canadians, British, Americans, Dutch, Australians and Romanians who are involved in the hard fighting.

Where is rest of NATO? What happened to the notion that an attack against one is an attack against all? What's the use belonging to a collective-security organization if its members duck under the table when duty calls?

In sum, the UN has failed to halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons and most of our allies are failing NATO in Afghanistan.

Having said that, we need to continue to support Canada's troops fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, but it's

time to have a good, long, hard look at multilateralism in the form of the UN and NATO as the cornerstone of our foreign and defence policies.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has suggested that it may be time to renew the historic bond between Canada and Britain and to share a common friendship with the United States.

I suggest we go further because it should not be forgotten that since the establishment of the Permanent Joint Board of Defence in 1940, Canada has signed some 2,500 military agreements with the U.S. for continental security and defence.

In these deeply disturbing times and given the UN and NATO failures, forging an even stronger military relationship with the United States, Canada's most important ally, would be a good first step in finding much-needed alternatives to outdated ways of defence thinking.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org