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Guterres has a good pencil, but NATO has a big hammer

Peace in the world is larger than NATO's vision. The UN's forthcoming 'New Agenda for Peace' will show it's a multi-agenda issue linking sustainable development, climate action and food security. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, pictured in 2018, is preparing 'A New Agenda for Peace.' The issue of peace in the world is far larger than NATO's vision, it's a multi-agenda issue, writes Douglas Roche. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

OPINION | BY DOUGLAS ROCHE | July 17, 2023

EDMONTON—NATO, which started in 1949 as a “North Atlantic” alliance of 12 Western nations to counter the Soviet Union, is now extending its reach into the Asia-Pacific area. Numbering 31 states with more to come, NATO is set to become the world’s policeman and is demanding all its members ramp up their military spending. Last week’s NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, showed that the Ukraine war has dashed any hope that the world could build a common security system based on co-operation. The re-arming of nations everywhere is taking place. The United Nations, which is legally charged with maintaining peace and security in the world, has been swept aside. The Canadian government deflected criticism of staying at 1.29 per cent of GDP for defence spending by beefing up its contingent in Latvia and starting a program to train Ukrainian cadets. Though it signed on to NATO’s incessant demand for members to raise military spending to two per cent of GDP, no date has been given to reach this target. In the meantime, Canada is letting NATO’s militarism overshadow its own foreign policy. Of the eight-member Arctic Council, NATO now has seven members who will sit across the table from Russia. There’s a lot to absorb in NATO’s new world order. Let’s start with the Pacific issue. For the second time, four Pacific states—Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea—were given prominent observer status at a NATO summit. U.S. President Joe Biden personally praised Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida for “standing up” to support Ukraine. The post-World War II Japan shunned a strong military, but modern Japan is now greatly boosting its defence spending. A NATO office in Tokyo is in the planning stage. The Asian relationship with NATO comes on top of the start of AUKUS, the new trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, which provides nuclear submarines to Australia. The purpose of the cozy

NATO-Asia relationship is transparent: containment of China. As the NATO Vilnius communiqué stated: “The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values.” China undoubtedly sees NATO as urging Asian states to gang up against it, and American military bases in Asia reinforce this perception.

Linkage with NATO is not going down well in all parts of the Pacific. Former Australian prime minister Paul Keating accused NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg of “conducting himself as an American agent more than he performs as a leader and spokesperson for European security.”

Public attention on NATO’s expansion is now focused on Ukraine, and the juggling act going on concerning a future date of entry. You don’t need polls to sense the public mood here in Canada: “Let Ukraine in.” Yet it was the expansion of NATO, following the end of the Cold War, that laid the groundwork for the difficulties that followed. The expansion brought in states that surround Russia, whose war-minded leader Vladimir Putin reacted by invading Ukraine. It is easy to condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine, as I do, but it is harder to face up to the factors that set the stage for the invasion. The late George Kennan, a famous U.S. diplomat who first proposed the policy of containment of the Soviet Union, called NATO expansion “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.”

Humiliated after the end of the Cold War, Russia increasingly felt vulnerable. That does not excuse Russia’s attack on Ukraine, but it helps to explain the new environment in which it found itself, especially when the U.S. openly sought dominance in the five spheres of air, land, sea, space and cyber. The U.S.’s \$826-billion military budget for 2024 is greater than the next 10 greatest military spenders combined; it is three times greater than China’s. NATO countries account for half of annual world military spending of \$1.2-trillion.

Three decades ago, Barbara Tuchman, the great historian and author of *The March of Folly*, was right when she wrote: “Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs.” In the process of NATO expansion and the rise of the military-industrial complex driving arms spending (and profits) to ever-new highs, the authority of the United Nations was weakened. Western countries particularly have been negligent of the very instrument chiefly founded by two Westerners: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

Starting in the 1980s, the West, led by the United States, has continually down-graded the UN as the principal instrument to preserve peace. The UN faltered by failing to get rid of the veto, which has virtually paralyzed the Security Council. Even UN peacekeeping is in decline, with Mali having just ejected a UN peacekeeping force from its territory. The issue of peace in the world is far larger than NATO's vision. Peace is a multi-agenda issue. Thus, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is preparing to publish "A New Agenda for Peace," which will address a myriad of challenges the international community faces today: a comprehensive approach to prevention linking peace, sustainable development, climate action and food security. Guterres has a good pencil, but NATO has a big hammer.

Former Senator Douglas Roche's new book, Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World, will be published in the fall.