Defending Arctic sovereignty from all comers—our friends included. The opening of the Alaska Highway on November 21, 1942, and a National Film Board photo—approved for publication by US military authorities!

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Can NATO Continue to be the Most Successful Military Alliance in History? Yes it can!

by Sarwar Kashmeri

Once the world’s most formidable military alliance, today’s NATO is a shadow of what it used to be. Its original raison d’etre for existence, the Soviet Union, disintegrated years ago, and its dreams of being a world policeman have withered in the mountains of Afghanistan.

From an alliance with a clearly defined objective, NATO has morphed into an amorphous, hard to describe alliance of Western countries that believe NATO can be a world cop. Empower women, reduce carbon emissions, rebuild nations, emancipate women, reduce carbon emissions, rebuild nations, emancipate women, reduce carbon emissions, rebuild nations, emancipate women, reduce carbon emissions, rebuild nations.

NATO’s actions in Libya demonstrated its lack of cohesion and structural weaknesses in a conflict with a minor military power. “The mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country — yet many allies are beginning to argue over minutiae that nobody two weeks ago, were willing to make up the difference,” Robert Gates, then U.S. Defense Secretary said in Brussels last year.

Gates noted with frustration that fewer than half the 28 nations in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization were engaged in the Libyan conflict, and that fewer than three were conducting airstrikes, even though the coalition unanimously backed the decision to go to war to protect civilians.

Questions remain about NATO’s decision to interpret the United Nations authorizations to defend civilians in Benin to also include regime change. A fateful decision that has already had a geopolitical fall out: Russia and China refused to endorse UN sanctions against the regime of Haifel al Assad of Syria where the killing of civilians proceeds unimpeded.

In Afghanistan, the performance of NATO has been even more tragic, as Canadians know well. Unlike Canada, many of America’s largest NATO allies refuse to participate in fire-fights because of their national caveats. The caveats have had deadly consequences. An official report prepared for the Czech Republic’s Army pointed out that Canadian forces assigned to ISAF have suffered numerous casualties because other contingents could not support them. This casualty count includes at least a dozen Canadian soldiers that may have been killed for lack of support from other NATO contingents during the 2006 Operation Medina.

In spite of its hollowed out condition, the fact however remains that NATO is still associated in the minds of many North Americans and Europeans as their defender of last resort. It is also one of the girders that support the hugely successful transatlantic relationship and is the only security platform that brings together the armed forces of the transatlantic allies.

Can anything be done to stop the Alliance’s slide into irrelevance?

After recent conversations with fifty political and military leaders, I believe NATO’s future relevance depends on its willingness to be bridged to the European Union’s Common Security and Defense Policy—CSDP.

Under this new version of NATO, (I call it NATO 2.0), the Alliance would only be activated to undertake missions that the Canada, the United States, and the European Union believe are in their mutual and vital national interests. The EU via CSDP would be primarily responsible for the defense and security of Europe and its periphery, using NATO assets as it deems necessary.

Since 2003, the EU has used CSDP to conduct 27 civilian and/or military missions from Africa to Asia, deploying more than 80,000 personnel, including soldiers, policemen, judges, custom officials, monitors, and rule of law experts. The missions include the deployment of 3,700 troops to Chad, and the anti-piracy naval force off the Somali coast.

Remarkably, all these deployments were planned and executed without a permanent military headquarters (MHQ). Opposition from NATO forced the EU to set up a system of five virtual MHQs. Under this system a new MHQ is designated for each European mission deployment. The MHQ is used only for the duration of the mission; after the mission is complete, the EU goes home. Every mission repeats the cycle of designating and standing up a new MHQ. It is a very inefficient and costly process that a permanent EUHQ would eliminate.
The establishment of the EUMHQ means a pooling of military production and procurement, effectively creating an EU-wide defense industry. This is hugely important because the EUS, including the United Kingdom, would account for about 90% of the EU’s defense spending. Thanks to the Lisbon Treaty, even without the UK’s participation in the EUMHQ, all of the EU’s defense expenditure will be more efficient.

Once the EUMHQ is established, and a leaner and more efficient European defense sector begins to evolve, the primary responsibility for the security of Europe and its periphery should be transferred from NATO to the EU in a reasonably short period of time. The United States and Canada should play the leading role in this transformation of NATO’s responsibilities, since both have been asking the Europeans to rationalize their overlapping defense programs for decades.

Rebalancing transatlantic security responsibilities through the establishment of NATO 2.0 will speak to the depth of the transatlantic relationship and the nature of its growth since its inception, when Europe was almost completely reliant on the United States and Canada for its very survival. A North American pillar via NATO 2.0 within CSDP will ensure a mechanism within the EU for the United States, Canada, and Europe to act together.

It would be a shame to let NATO fade away because it may or may not be aligned with American national interests. These countries may or may not be part of the Western Hemisphere. All three arms of the Canadian military were involved - either in the Norwegian or the Alaskan polar regions. RCN escorts fought their way through the Barents Sea in the Murmansk convoys, Canadian soldiers landed in Spitsbergen, Noordzee Operation Gauntlet and on Kiska, the Aleutians in Green Light Force and RCAF squadrons flew in defense of the United States.

In the Canadian North where airfields and highways were thrown up almost overnight, the battle over sovereignty was against a friend and neighbour, the United States. Between 1941-5, the immediate influx of American airmen, soldiers and construction battalions far outnumbered the local inhabitants in Labrador, northern British Columbia and the Yukon. Canadians who since the British had bequeathed their Arctic possessions to North America to jointly develop and procure a range of advanced weapon systems including unmanned aerial vehicles, nuclear submarine equipment, military satellites, missiles, nuclear weapons research, and shared aircraft carrier operations.

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Peter Pigott, one of Canada’s most esteemed aviation authors, is a prolific contributor to SITREP. Most recently he sat down with RCMI’s Military Historian/Night on his latest book “From Fair And Wide: The Complete History of Canadian Arctic Sovereignty.” Toronto: Dundurn, 2011. This article is an excerpt.

Northern Sovereignty In World War II

By Peter Pigott

The Second World War changed the Canadian North and the Arctic with the ferocity and the transience of the Yukon gold rush. Unlike the 1914-18 conflict, this time geography and developments in aviation and radar put the Arctic on the periphery of military strategy. It was about sovereignty—in this instance, that of the northern part of the Western Hemisphere. All three arms of the Canadian military were involved - either in the Norwegian or the Alaskan polar regions. RCN escorts fought their way through the Barents Sea in the Murmansk convoys, Canadian soldiers landed in Spitsbergen, Noordzee Operation Gauntlet and on Kiska, the Aleutians in Green Light Force and RCAF squadrons flew in defense of the United States.

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of the United States Government to undertake the building and wartime maintenance of the highway. At the insistence of the prime minister, a key clause inserted was that the United States was bound to pay 25 per cent of the total cost of the highway which lies in Canada shall become in all respects a part of the Canadian highway system, subject to the understanding that there shall at no time be imposed any discriminatory conditions in relation to the use of the road as between United States and United States citizens.

Now called the Alcan Highway, it would also have eight landing strips built alongside and a road from Haines, Alaska to Chapleau, Yukon giving the US Army additional facilities for distributing supplies by truck. With airfields and highways came communications. In June 1942, the Northwest Communications System began when the United States Signal Corps arranged to have line communications parallel the Alaska Highway. They ran 1,871 miles of line from Edmonton to Fairbanks using 93,000 poles and 23 repeater stations planted at 1 kilometer intervals. On May 14, 1945, when the Canadian Army assumed responsibility for the Canadian portion of the Alaska Highway, the RCAF did the same for the ‘pole’ line. Within a year the RCAF turned the ‘pole’ line over to the Department of Transport which on April 1, 1947 contracted it to Canadian National Telegraph.

On April 11th, the US Army Corps of Engineers officially started construction of the highway. The Canadian government’s approach to major projects like the Trans Canada Highway had been to treat them as unemployment relief schemes to get idle men doing something useful. In contrast, to the US military the Alaska Highway was a military campaign and perpetual war, mountains, swamps, rivers and forest the enemy. Seven regiments of engineers were the shock troops to be followed by the main army of 7,500 construction workers from the southern United States who had never experienced these handicaps, they managed to help push through a pioneer road in only eight months. It was a saga worthy of the country that had dug the Panama Canal thirty years before and would put a man on the moon less than thirty years later. In eight months and 12 days, at the cost of $140 million, 1,523 miles of the Alaska Highway were built through forests, across swamps and around mountains by US Army engineers and 6,000 civilians. What prewar should have taken five years to build was to be roughly formed in the eight months and completed in another year. Typically American, a massive publicity campaign had accompanied the truck conveyos snaking their way through the wilderness and movie clips were shown throughout the Dominion.

On November 21, 1942 the Alaska Highway was officially opened at Soldier’s Summit. Mackenzie King sent a congratulatory telegram which conveyed his feelings succinctly. "Agree that at the conclusion of the war that part of the United States: “Agree that at the conclusion of the war that part of the United States Government to undertake the building and wartime maintenance of the highway which lies in Canada shall become in all respects a part of the Canadian highway system, subject to the understanding that there shall at no time be imposed any discriminatory conditions in relation to the use of the road as between United States and United States citizens.”

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December 19th: Lockheed 7634 encountered severe icing conditions, and, on the south-bound trip, icing endangered the aircraft to such an extent that only superb piloting and a great deal of good luck prevented a crash and probably fatalities. It’s criminal that we should be asked to carry on northern flying without having aircraft properly equipped with de-icing and other winter equipment...Severe tempera-

From Dawson Creek, BC to Fairbanks, Alaska would be of was of wood, hurriedly assembled and single lane. " said Maze. It was a first foritude.

A convoy of RCAF trucks took seven to nine days to make the round trip from Dawson Creek to Whitehorse—except when they carried perishables. Then it was a nonstop trip of thirty-six to forty hours. This was done by flying relief daily that preserved the food. The RCAF posts were carried in 1944 to the RCAF posts was five million pounds. "The winter months meant that the drivers were unable to get down on the mountain sides lest they skid over the cliffs," the squadron leader said, "and anyway they needed as much speed as possible to get up the ice covered hills that inevitably awaited them as soon as they had successfully reached the bottom of the previous one. In the summer the rain made the road as slippery as ice and spring brought flash floods from the melting snow on the top of the mountains. "It was quite possible to be driving comfortably along Highway one moment and the next to see a deluge of icy water come rushing around a bend to wash away the road, one car and oneself.” Maze said. "But the drivers always had one thing to look forward to, however. They used to stop for a swim at the hot springs near Telegraph Creek. "The soil is ours, the toil is yours," he announced. No permission, "he wrote, "to build the road across Dominion Canada’s “unprecedented action in granting the United States permission,” he wrote, “to build the road across Dominion territory.” In Dawson Creek, BC to Fairbanks, Alaska would be of

The booming wartime economy and free spending GIs and American civilian engineers that the Highway and CA-

On December 23rd, Sqn. Ldr. Guest arrived. He reported intensive cold at Whitehorse, average temperature 40 below zero. Personnel in desperate need of clothing and money. Both of these items on way, but weather delaying. Living conditions at Whitehorse deplorable. Our personnel are living in our barracks without plumbing or adequate heat, and to get their meals they must walk 1 and 1/2 miles to the Contractor’s. Only one panel wagon available.”

sent to the Staging Route in early 1943 as the RCAF Air-Rail Transportation officer, Sqn. Ldr. R.M. Maze and Sgt. D. Whyte would set out to drive the completed Highway. On the 17th day journey they counted 22 flat tyres and had to buy or scrounge a half dozen new ones. "Almost all the bridges were blocked up from the US symbol blazing white line," said Maze. "Just north of Watson Lake, we shot down the mountainside towards one of them. As we drove on to it, our lights probing through the night fog we suddenly spotted an Army truck speeding at us in the opposite direction. I don’t know how we made it. Both sides of our car were scraped, by the left and the truck by the right.”

When he returned to Edmonton, Maze set to work organizing a Freight Transit Unit for the RCAF posts on the NSWR. By the autumn of 1943, a fleet of trucks was operating from the newly built refrigerated warehouse at Dawson Creek carrying supplies to all RCAF detachments on the route. “In 1944, several people in positions of authority complained that an Air Force detachment itself by moving freight on the ground” remembered Maze. “To quiet these charges, someone figured out that an airman’s daily food supply, packed for shipment out that an airman’s daily food supply, packed for shipment
Defense Command asked for more aircraft to defend Alaska, all that the USAAF chief H.H. Arnold could spare were as-
sembled at Spokne Wash.—the 11th Pursuit Squadron with
25 P-40s at them. On the disembarkation Group with 13 B-25s.
Installing winter maintenance equipment on them meant that
the aircraft didn’t leave Spokne until January 2, 1942. By the
time they negotiated the rough NWSR airfields and groped
their way to Alaska six of the 40s had crashed, six were lost
and the B-25s fared little better. To reinforce Alaska, the US
military also had eleven American airlines airlift troops through
Canada to Fairbanks. If this wasn’t enough, that spring, the United States
decided to ferry aircraft to its Russian ally over the route.
With such heavy traffic, the Americans wanted all airway
deficiencies corrected and under their con-
trol—and immediately.

For Canada, ceding wartime sovereignty to the United States
for the ultimate defeat of the Axis was commendable—but troubling. Al-
though a foreign military (however benign) to construct and operate
airfields, radio and military installations for what had
nothing to do with civil aviation was setting uncomfortable
precedents. In Ottawa, politicians, bureaucrats and the mili-
tary were not keen on these development or yet to see
these installations as threatening to Canada’s sovereignty.

As the Director of Air Services in Canada J.A. Wilson was
aware, airways were no longer in the mandate of the De-
partment of Transport. On March 11, 1942, the RCAF, the Depart-
ment of Transport and the USAAF met in Ottawa to work out a
compromise. The Department of Transport would install
intermediate radio ranges on the airways between Fort St. John
and Fort Nelson and between Watson Lake and Whitehorse
and construct emergency airfields in-between each town.
The USAAF would install ground to air radio equipment at each
of the main fields along the airway and when the Canadians
built the support facilities such as barracks, hangars and mess
halls, the Americans would maintain them.

Many of the USAAF aircraft ferried through the NWSR
lie today on the bottom of lake beds in the North. Engine
trouble, inexperienced pilots, getting lost or running out of
fuel on the route in the winter meant putting down on a frozen
lake surface and so many pilots did so that the region around
Watson Lake became known as “Million Dollar Valley.”
On one occasion a USAAF DC-3 forced landed on a deserted
bridge several miles from Watson Lake, killing the pilot and
co-pilot. Two passengers survived in the fuselage for eleven
days, even keeping a fire going while they heard aircraft over-
head searching for them. The crew gave up hope of rescue and each with a broken leg crawled out
into the bush—hoping they were heading towards Watson.

For eight days they crawled through waist-deep snow groping
for a small toboggan with food and water before an RCMP
constable followed their tracks in the snow and found them.1

As to who would pay for the improve-
mants to the Route—a second compromise was reached. While the Department of Trans-
port was waiting for a political decision on the financial arrangements, the Depart-
ment of National Defence paid for the Canadian share. Aware of Japanese inten-
tions on the Aleutians, the US government was desperate to bring in US Army
engineer units immediately. But fearing postwar repercussions
the Americans hesitated and would not be paid for the improve-
ments to the NWSR during and after the war.

The Department of Transport kept control of the opera-
tion of the NWSR until September 1942, when as the route
was being used for military purposes it was handed over to the
Royal Canadian Air Force. Six RCAF Officers and 30 men were sent
at each of the airfields enroute to begin the military’s take over. Their
instructions convey the sensitivities of the time. They were
instructed “to act as ‘ambassadors’ of the Canadian government—
which considering they were in their own country is an interesting
choice of word. But the intent was clear. At some future date
the RCAF would take over from the Department of Transport and the USAAF. While the transfer
of assets with the former could be settled in Ottawa, issues with the latter were espe-
cially contentious. When the US military attempted to take
control of air traffic at Whitehorse, it was firmly rebuffed.

The Northwest Staging Route

$31,311,196
Airstrips along the Alaska Highway
$3,262,687
Airstrips along the Mackenzie River
$1,264,150
Crimson Route along Hudson Bay
$27,460,330
Mingan Airport, PQ
$6,327,980
Goose Bay Airport
$5,430,000

Telephone line from Edmonton to
the alaska boundary
$9,432,208

The grand total paid by Canada for the airmen's for the airfields was $111,080,000. In the years to come, the United States continued
and paid for the improvements on the airfields and runways.

The story was used by Ernest Gann in his book “Fate Is the Hunter” and
appears in the American Airway book “The North West Staging Route” Roundel Magazine in seven parts. 

Notes
1 Ironically, the one resource industry in the North that did not prosper dur-
ing the war was gold mining. Considered nonessential, men and machinery were
withdrawn from the mines and allocated to the war effort or to Fort
Radium to make the fissile material for atomic bombs.
2 Canada Treaty Series 1942/13
3 “Vancouver Province,” November 22, 1942.
4 The story was used by Ernest K. Gann in his book “Fate Is the Hunter” and
made into the movie “Island in The Sky.”
5 D. Hiat 181.089 (1939) North West Air Command (RCAF) 31 December
1942 4 April 1944, “USAAF Control Towers on Hangars (NWSR),” January
1944.
6 S.G. Fench, “The North West Staging Route,” Roundel Magazine in seven parts,
1955.

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The State of the World: A Framework

by George Friedman

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he evolution of geopolitics is cyclical. Powers rise, fall and shift. Changes occur in every generation in an
unending ballet. However, the period between 1989 and 1991 was unique in that a long cycle of human history spanning hundreds of years ended, and with it a shorter cycle also came to a close. The world is still reverberating from the events of that period.

On Dec. 25, 1991, an epoch ended. On that day the Soviet Union collapsed, and for the first time in almost 500 years no European power held global sway. The end of that era, and its notable successor, the United States, have been the two preeminent global powers of the past generation. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the world was dominated by a bipolar world. The United States and the Soviet Union were the two global superpowers that dominated the world. With each power, all of the world’s other powers had to react to it. The United States, for example, would have to make decisions in light of the two superpowers. The Soviets would have to react to the United States, but also to each other. As the bipolar world ended, the world entered a unipolar world. The United States has been the dominant global power for 20 years, but its ascendancy has left it off-balance and unprepared institutionally or psychologically for its position.

The end of the Japanese economic miracle, the first time the world had marveled at an Asian power’s sustained growth rate as the same power’s financial system crumbled. The end of the Japanese miracle and the economic problem of integrating East and West Germany both changed the way the global economy worked. The 1991 Maastricht Treaty set the stage for Europe’s attempt at integration and was the framework for Europe in the post-Cold War world. Tiananmen Square set the course for China in the next 20 years and was the Chinese answer to a collapsing Soviet empire. It created a structure that allowed for economic development but assured the dominance of the Communist Party. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait was designed to change the balance of power in the Persian Gulf after the Iraq-Iran war and tested the United States’ willingness to dominate that region.

In 1989-1991 the world changed the way it worked, whether measured in centuries or generations. It was an extraordinary period whose significance is only now emerging. It locked into place a long-term changing of the guard, where North America replaced Europe as the center of the international system. But generations come and go, and we are now in the middle of the first generational shift since the collapse of the European powers, a shift that began in 2008 but is only now working itself out in detail.

The United States has been the unchallenged global power for 20 years, but its ascendancy has left it off-balance and unprepared institutionally or psychologically for its position. The United States has swung from an excessive optimism in the late 1980s to a growing concern about its position today. Never before had the United States been the dominant global power. Prior to World War II, American power had been growing from its place at the margins of the international system, but it was emerging on a multipolar stage. After World War II, it found itself in a bipolar world, facing off with the Soviet Union in a struggle in which American victory was hardly a foregone conclusion.

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The electric power industry in the United States has enjoyed more than fifty years of subsidy from the taxpayers in the form of a sort of willful blindness. The physics of fission power are immutable, even as it mutates Uranium fuel into lighter elements. Each kilowatt-hour of power generated creates waste in the form of spent nuclear fuel (SNF) and reactor equipment that eventually wears out and must be replaced. The spent fuel, usually in the form of the rods withdrawn from the core, is considered "high level" waste, "hot" enough in remaining radiation to be deadly to humans for a very long time (though no longer hot enough to generate power); such waste contains Tc-99 (half-life 220,000 years), Pu-239, Np-237 (half-life two million years) and the oldest extant (but ruined) human structures items are about 2 million years old (stone tools, simply chipped rocks) and the oldest extant human structures are about 10,000 years old (a Neolithic-age tower in Jericho) it seems odd to think that anyone, anywhere knows how to build a container that will hold this poison for the next several hundred thousand years, let alone millions.

The US Department of Energy has collected billions of dollars from electric utility ratepayers for the Nuclear Waste Fund, and it long believed that the solution was storage of both military and civilian high level waste deep underground at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. After spending over $10 billion on studies and construction, with great political and technical opposition, Congress voted to completely and finally defund the project on April 14, 2011. As of now, the United States has no plan for long term storage of SNF high level waste, and continues to allow it to accumulate in cooling pools at each nuclear facility where it is generated. The Nuclear Waste Fund balance is clearly insufficient to pay for long term safe SNF storage. Dr. Steven Chu, Secretary of Energy has promised to convene a "Blue Ribbon" panel to study the issue again.

In addition, many more tons of low level waste, such as worn out plant equipment, worker uniforms, medical waste, construction debris, and the like are stockpiled and stored around the US and the world, with no consistent plans for "disposal" and safety. Much of this waste is dangerous to human health, and some of it could possibly be used by terrorists in "dirty" bombs. (Disposal, of course, is impossible, since as anyone who has studied ecology can tell you, the central lesson of that science is that there is no "away" anywhere on earth—we cannot just throw things "away" pretending that out of sight and out of mind is somehow, magically, safe and nontoxic as well.)

As the failure of the spent fuel pools at Fukushima Dichi teaches us, the short-term risks are at least as large as the longer-term ones. If we cannot keep the pool full of water and the fuel rods cooled sufficiently, the fuel heats the water, boiling it away. Once the water level falls, the rods continue to heat, and either melt or catch fire. Melted fuel presents a difficult problem, but at least we can now fight fires. After Columbus' voyage, lacked a clear sense of the reality they had created, Americans have no clear sense of the world they find themselves in. This fact continues to define how the world works.

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March 24, 2011 aerial photo showing damaged Unit 3, left, and Unit 4 of the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Okumamachi, Fukushima prefecture, northern Japan. 

O f all the professions, accounting is considered the most conservative. After all, credits and debits must line up, and figures must balance. Even in the world of federal budgets, entitlement programs, off the books wars, and partisan politics, there eventually comes a day of reckoning when the bills must be paid. So, too, in the field of nuclear power, things must be made to balance, and a day of reckoning comes. With the Fukushima Dichi nuclear plant in ruins (http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/tsunamiupdate01.html), we are again reminded that atomic energy is neither as cheap nor as clean as the sparkling futuristic films of the Eisenhower era "Atoms for Peace" made it seem.
Book Review: Dan Bjarnason, “Triumph at Kapyong: Canada’s Pivotal Battle in Korea” reviewed by Maj Thomas E.K. Fitzgerald

Kapyong, a forgotten battle in a “forgotten” war. Kapyong, where seven hundred dirty, scruffy, cold, highly trained amateurs stood their ground and beat back repeated human wave attacks. Kapyong, where the 2PPCLI slammed the door shut on a Chinese breakthrough and thereby saved Seoul from capture. Kapyong, where the heroic defenders of a small but vital hill earned the Presidental Distinguished Unit Citation for their bravery but, to the dishonor of the government of the day, were not permitted to wear the coveted blue ribbon for five years after this. All this and more are recounted in noted Canadian journalist and amateur historian Dan Bjarnason’s fast paced and superbly written book, Triumph at Kapyong: Canada’s Pivotal Battle in Korea. Based on primary and secondary sources and on the interviews of a dwindling number of survivors, Bjarnason has penned a well deserved tribute to these all but forgotten men.

The background to the battle is well known. Danial, as part of its United Nations commitment to stem the North Korean invasion of South Korea on July 25, 1950, initially contributed three infantry battalions, the 2PPCLI, 1st Battalion of the Gloucestshire Regiment, and the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Canada. The 1st Battalion of the Gloucestshire Regiment was decimated almost to a man along the banks of the Imjin River.

The 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), supported by a company of the US 72nd Heavy Tank Battalion held high ground five kilometers across the Kapyong valley to the east but, after battling wave after wave of Chinese infantry for sixteen hours and running low on ammunition, both units withdrew on April 24. The waiting was over. The stage was set for the 2PPCLI and the Battle of Kapyong.

Bjarnason’s book is a superb account of the battle. Written in a “you are there” style, the author recounts hour by hour, the ebb and flow of the battle. Bjarnason recounts as if he himself was in the battle, you are at the Alamo, the 1/7 in the Ia Drang valley. It is amazing as Bjarnason laments that Kapyong has not taken its place in this pantheon. It may be our national desire to forget a war that was never really popular and finally even solved once it had started. It may be that the ten fatalities suffered in the battle made the battle a minor affair. It may be that recent events have overshadowed the battle. It may be that the survivors, volunteers all, left the army after the war and took up their civil lives and minimized their efforts. As one veteran observed, “It was just a hill after all. Just like a thousand hills over there.”

This is regrettable. Kapyong deserves a greater place in the collective psyche of Canada. That short, sharp battle on that cold, lonely shalh hill disposes once and for all on the myth that Canadians are not, by nature, a warrior society. Bjarnason’s book, Triumph at Kapyong should be read by anyone who thinks otherwise.


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Letter to the Editor—A Response on Defence Procurement

Dear Editor: I read with interest the article, “DND Acquisition in an Era of Reform” by Rodnie Allison which appeared in the March-April 2012 issue of SITREP. While the author does a good job outlining why defence procurement desperately needs reform, a little historical perspective might have added even more strength to his position. Specifically, and please accept this is presented from a retired naval officer’s narrow viewpoint.

In the late 40’s, early 50’s Canada built one naval ice breaker, and then stopped the program. In the late 50’s through the 60’s, Canada built three Operational Support ships, and then stopped that program. In the 70’s, Canada built 14 mine sweepers, and then stopped the program. Six were transferred to the French Navy almost immediately after construction and replaced by six more in the period 1956-57. The building program was then terminated. Then there were the St. Laurent, Restigouche, MacKenzie and Annapolis class DDE/DDH and either prevailed or died—the Spartans at Thermopylae, the French Foreign Legion at Cameron, the Old Guard at Waterloo, the 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers at Etretas, the Texans at the Alamo, the 1/7 in the Ia Drang valley. It is amazing as Bjarnason laments that Kapyong has not taken its place in this pantheon.

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Turco-Syrian Border could easily become a flashpoint for NATO

by Eric S. Morse

Late in the afternoon of April 11 a five-line item came through on Stratfor’s news-and-intel subscription service, buried among fifty other snippets with esoteric titles like ‘Japan: Bahraini King Meets With PM’, and ‘Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood ‘To Hold Million-Man March’. And there, nearly lost in the heap, was ‘Syria: Turkey May Invoke NATO’s Protection—Erdogan’.

That one was a stop-and-do-a-double-take number—‘He said WHAT??’ It was followed about twelve hours later by a more detailed report from Reuters, some other scattered references, and then not much else.

Appropriately Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had told a planeful of Turkish journalists somewhere over China that Turkey might invoke Article V of the NATO Charter to protect their southern border against Syrian incursions. (Syrian forces have been violating the border regularly in pursuit of refugees from the insurrection, with ground forces and artillery fire).

As it happens, Article V is the ‘an attack on one is an attack on all’ clause that was famously invoked in 2001 to involve NATO countries in the Afghanistan war. In fact, that is the only time Article V has ever been invoked since NATO was founded in 1949. So for Erdogan to have brought it up is hardly petty or picayune, even if it was said in a flying scrum. The leader of a NATO member country is talking about invoking a Charter clause that could conceivably involve much of the alliance in operations up to and including combat on Turkey’s southern frontier. That’s important, but almost no major media picked it up.

The problem is, there was no context. It’s a single story that pops up and then fades because it’s a little arcane, nobody’s feeding it with follow-ups, and it was said at the wrong time and in the wrong place to get Western media attention.

Presumably, if Erdogan was serious about this—and you have to take him at face value until proven otherwise—NATO had not yet received any kind of formal approach. (It never has, as things turn out.) NATO HQ in Brussels did manage to get out a response from Agence France Press that “We are deeply concerned by events in Syria, particularly the recent incidents on the border with our ally Turkey,”, but that got little play in the afternoon of April 11 a five-line item came via Stratfor’s news and intel subscription service, buried among fifty other snippets with esoteric titles like ‘Japan: Bahraini King Meets With PM’ and ‘Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood To Hold Million-Man March’. And there, nearly lost in the heap, was ‘Syria: Turkey May Invoke NATO’s Protection—Erdogan’.

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It would take a meeting of the North Atlantic Council, the highest body in NATO, to authorize and shape collective military intervention in support of Turkey. If the idea was still afloat in Ankara, there had to have been more than a few NATO-country diplomats working like mad to convince Erdogan that it may not have been the best idea in the world. Apparently they succeeded because as of mid-May no more had been heard of it. (The perpetual elephant in the plane whenever a news item like this comes up is how many beers the speaker had had at the time that he spoke.)

In fact a formal request from Turkey under Article V would put NATO and its members in a major bind. Turkey is an important member of NATO and a growing force in the Middle East, but it is not what you’d call a typical NATO country, being the only Middle Eastern and Muslim-majority member. It joined NATO originally because of a mutual interest—containing the Russians—that exists to this day, but its interests are definitely different from any other member’s. But it is a vital geopolitical anchor for NATO because of its strength and location. It also has an Islamist-but-pragmatic leader (Erdogan) even though officially it’s a militantly secular state. NATO can’t afford to treat an Article V request from Turkey in any way that would suggest that their security concerns are less important than any other member’s. Added to which, Afghanistan was an ‘out-of-theatre’ exercise in which some NATO members had serious doubts, as evidenced by the layers of caveats. You can’t say that Turkey is out-of-theatre, its southern border is NATO’s by definition.

But NATO desperately does not want to get involved on the Turco-Syrian border, partly for the same reasons the West does not want to get involved in a direct attack on Syria—a thing that’s almost impossible to do in practice—but also because the southern Turkish border is hideously complex; a potential multi-front war on a single front. In the western segment, there is Syria and all its sectaries, then Iraq and the non-state of Kurdistan straddling the border, and finally Iran itself—and that is a drastic oversimplification. So NATO has to hope that cooler heads continue to prevail in Ankara, and that they don’t get a formal Article V request from the Turks.

The intervention in Afghanistan has been a very difficult experience for the alliance, at least as much because of institutional problems like differing rules of engagement within the force as because of the enemy, and it is not one that NATO would choose to repeat any time soon, in or out of theatre.

The insertion of UN monitors, however futile in the long run, may have bought some breathing space on this particular issue. But the Syrian situation is not under anything resembling control (it is increasingly bleeding into Lebanon), and the Turkish border, aka NATO’s southern flank, still has to be regarded as a potential Middle Eastern flashpoint.

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