

The Role of Canada within NATO. Yves Engler

Global Research News Hour Interview

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Yves Engler is an author, activist and Canadian Foreign Policy critic. He recently wrote with co-author Owen Schalk the book [Canada's Long Fight Against Democracy](#). His book tour can be found at [this website](#):

[Book Tour: Canada's Long Fight Against Democracy - Yves Engler](#)

The following is an interview we recorded with him on the afternoon of April 3, 2024 regarding the role of Canada within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO,) and the result of pulling out as opposed to remaining in as the "voice of reason" at the table.

Global Research: We start the program by considering Canada's role in it. On this question we talked to Yves Engler the activist, author and Canadian Foreign Policy critic. I asked him why forming a defensive military alliance was any worse than joining it in the field as in World War 2.

Yves Engler: Well, concretely, if you go back to the founding of NATO, NATO led Canada into sending troops to Europe to help block indigenous communism and socialism. So, to basically blunt the Left in Western Europe which was very strong at the end of World War II. Communists would have won in Italy the first election if the Americans hadn't intervened. They had 30 percent of the vote in France and a bunch of the ministers in the government. Kind of similar dynamic in Greece. And so, what NATO was initially conceived as, was as a tool to blunt the Left. It was a perception that communism was the way of the future. And Lester Pearson, who was then Canada's Foreign Minister around the creation of NATO, he was open about this, even in the House of Commons. I've quoted his speech many times where he actually says - he said that the communists were taking over all elements of society including the kindergartens, and we needed NATO to blunt that. So, that was an element. And we stationed thousands of troops in Western Europe and obviously many tens

of thousands of US troops were stationed in Western Europe partly as part of that process.

The other part of the process was it was about bringing the decolonizing – the colonial powers were weakened during World War II. And the US was in ascendance and it was about bringing the geopolitical order under a US-led umbrella and to sort of have a – let's call it a fake decolonization where the decolonization, to the extent that it happened would, you know, be with US dominance.

But concretely, we began providing all kinds of weapons to the colonial powers in the 1950s as they were suppressing independence movements in, you know, the Kikuyu in Kenya, in The Congo, obviously the French in Algeria, that was the most egregious example when it was the 400,000 French troops in Algeria, Canada was giving – giving, not selling – giving bullets and the like to the French, knowing full well where the French were using those weapons.

So, that formal alliance that Canada was – three countries, Canada, the US, and Britain – were the three countries that initiated the initial secret talks to form NATO. Some people say NATO was a Canadian idea. That basically brought Canada into a deepening alliance around colonialism, protecting the elite structure within Western Europe. And that's the history of it. And then you, you know, fast forward into today and NATO is a tool that has been used to justify Canada bombing Yugoslavia, you know, in the late 1990s, bombing Libya in 2011. Stationing troops on Russia's border. It is used to justify expanding military spending. It's not the only tool or alliance, but it is a central one in justifying a more militaristic, Washington-centred Canadian foreign policy.

GR: Does this membership in NATO then curtail Canadian sovereignty in any way?

YE: I mean, it doesn't formally. But it does, it's a – I would see it more as a tool in the hands of the pro-imperialist, pro-militarist elements of Canadian society. And it regularly gets brought up as that, you know, we're part of this alliance, we have to support the alliance, we have to send troops to Russia's border. We're part of the alliance, the alliance is getting ready to bomb Libya, we have to participate. That's kind of how it's used.

Most instances – because you know, they frame it as a defensive alliance and it's not, of course – they – and you know, if there is a NATO member that is attacked, we are technically responsible to defend that member. Now how you defend that member is up for discussion. Do you send one troop? Do you send 10,000 troops? There's all kinds of ways in which you could parse that out. But in the practical world where NATO is not a defensive alliance, where it's a belligerent alliance in the real world, the contributions – you know, Canada didn't need to lead the bombing of Libya in 2011. Some NATO members didn't participate in the bombing of – and the war, not just bombing, we had special forces and naval vessels that were part of that war. They didn't even participate.

So, it doesn't – you know, in a sense, I wouldn't emphasize this idea that it impinges on Canadian sovereignty. In fact, I would say that NORAD in many ways is a more clear-cut impingement on sovereignty than NATO is. But in practical reality, NATO becomes, I would say undercuts the popular ethos that is somewhat ambivalent toward military spending and ambivalent towards joining US-led wars which I think the Canadian public is somewhat ambivalent towards both of those things. And NATO basically strengthens the hands of those who, you know, want more participation. So, to call it undercut – undermining sovereignty, I don't know if I would use that language exactly. But certainly, it undercuts a

ambiguousness or – sorry, ambivalenceness towards militarism and US imperialism.

GR: You mentioned earlier that this NATO was basically put down the Left as it started to emerge following 1945. But the NDP, has it been consistently supportive of this NATO? How do you – you know, because that’s a party of the Left in Canada. So, how —

YE: Yeah.

GR: — do you kind of string those two things together?

YE: The CCF was, before – immediately, the CCF leadership backed NATO. Now the CCF was the predecessor to the NDP. And it took a pro-NATO position. It actually subverted internal democracy in – there was a convention coming up in 1950 and they – the leadership came out in favour before allowing members to have that discussion. And for years, more than a decade, two decades almost, NATO was the most contentious issue at CCF and then later NDP conventions. Where the sort of activist base, peace-minded base of the party, increasingly pushed the Canada-out-of-NATO position. And then, they finally won that in the 1966 – I believe it was – convention. The party had a Canada-out-of-NATO position for about 20 years. And then, when Ed Broadbent in 1987 looked like he had a real shot at becoming prime minister, the media started really kind of raising this Canada-out-of-NATO policy of the NDP and sort of made like an issue of the matter. And Broadbent basically, without ever passing it at a convention, just kind of like was able to toss out this policy and re-wrote the policy to say that basically the party didn’t have a Canada-NATO position. It was never formally withdrawn and there was never a vote. So, you know, the NDP voted for the bombing of Libya in 2011, same thing with Yugoslavia. Even Svend Robinson, who is certainly the most left-wing foreign affairs critic in NDP history, he even went on – he supported the bombing of Yugoslavia for the first part. He changed his course I think like 40 or 50 days into the bombing campaign, but he initially endorses it. So, the NDP has been pro-NATO.

Now the, you know, big factions of the sort of social democratic world within Western Europe have also been pro-NATO. And so, it was, you know, sort of anti-communist, you know, in the sense of the French Communist Party or the Italian Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s. But yeah, so, you know, I don’t think that that’s – there’s no necessary contradiction between the NDP/CCF being supportive of NATO, and NATO having this element of its history. It’s no longer important to the alliance today, but an element of its history of having been a tool of weakening the Western European Left or more specifically the Western European communist movement.

GR: Okay. Like, let’s suppose you’re the Prime Minister for a second and, you know, you have the opportunity to take us out of NATO, but you got to consider that a lot of the people who might support that like want NATO completely gone, not just, ‘We’re out of it.’ Because, if we’re out of it, then you know, NATO is still going to carry on doing what they’re doing, except how much influence will we have as an independent nation. At least in NATO, within NATO we can sit at the table and say, ‘Well, okay, let’s break up NATO. But in the meantime, you know, I’m going to stay there.’ You know what I’m saying? It’s like, having an influence at the table, is that, you know basically – like even to the – you might be able to moderate or eliminate the use of nuclear weapons within the house, so to speak. So, how —

YE: Yeah, it —

GR: — how do you respond to that?

YE: Well, it was the other way around, in fact. On the nuclear weapons question is a good one on that front, because the reason why the Canadian government has been so opposed to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons which – I forget the exact number now – but I think it's like a 130 countries have signed or more than 130 countries have endorsed it and it came into operation after 50 countries formally endorsed it and that was about two years ago. I'm not sure what the number is up to now, it's probably – I think it's like 60 or 60-something. It's an effort to abolish nuclear weapons. A general assembly votes, it's more than two thirds of countries in the world support these votes. And the Canadian government, which we of course don't have nuclear weapons. And I think, you know, even Canada outside of NATO may still not take up the nuclear question like I would like to see it.

But the major obstacle – and the Canadian officials have even stated this – that we can't endorse the bid to abolish nuclear weapons because we are a part of an alliance where nuclear weapons are part of the military strategy. NATO has a working group on nuclear weapons that, you know, incorporates the use of nuclear weapons as part of their military strategies. If the Canadian government withdrew from NATO, its margin for maneuver on taking, you know, clear anti-nuclear policies which they claim to support, right? The Trudeau government claims to support abolishing nuclear weapons. But yet, they won't actually sign onto an international treaty that's trying to do that. So, NATO becomes an obstacle to that kind of thing.

Now the more general question – I mean, you know, who do we send into NATO? You know, it's Canadian generals and Canadian military figures, right? These are not, you know, peace activists who are going in and making the case for demilitarization. These are military officials and some of them are, you know, global affairs diplomats.

A large part is, you know, military officials. And it's a body for them to organize themselves collectively, internationally. It's a body for them to, you know, ramp themselves up really, in terms of taking ever more militaristic positions. No, I don't think that there is any sort of sensible position that is like, 'Let's keep, you know, continue to have a seat at the table to make the case against militarism. If Canada was to withdraw from NATO, that would have massive reverberations on the alliance. I mean, thinking you know, if in a short-term perspective, if Canada tried to do that, you had some sort of left-wing government try to do that, the Americans would try to overthrow the Canadian government. I mean, it would be – the implications would be so significant with that.

Now if it was done as part of a process of building and rebuilding and to work for us – that would not just be within Canada, that would be, you know, within all the NATO countries. For the most part, those anti-war movements have been fairly weak. I mean, the recent response to the destruction of Gaza has rekindled some anti-war organization and mobilization. But if you go back six months, we were in a very weak point. If we build this anti-NATO position, I know, you know, there's a big NATO summit in Washington D.C. in July and a big protest planned in the US against that. And so, you know, if we build – put on the political agenda Canada, Britain, Germany, France, Poland, wherever that, you know, out-of-NATO kind of position. You know, if Canada, you know, let's say ten years down the road, five years down the road, whereas you know, the movement is building and Canada withdraws and that can help spur the forces within Poland and Germany and France calling for withdrawal.

That, to me, is the kind of realistic scenario which Canada-out-of-NATO would play out and it could have quite a, you know, beneficial effect on unravelling the whole alliance, even though of course it only just be one country withdrawn.

GR: Before you go, is there anything you want to say to tell listeners about your recent book, co-written with Owen Schalk called “Canada’s Fight Against Democracy”?

YE: No, it’s just – it’s a – details 20-plus coups that Canada has been involved with. You know, half of those are sort of passively supportive, like against Mosaddegh in Iran or Arbenz in Guatemala. And then, other examples are more active. The most clear-cut example, of course, is against the Aristide in the Haitian government in 2004, but also against Allende in Chile and Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah and the like. And it’s a book that I think, you know, it’s some history that is important history, but it also tells us a lot about this whole business about foreign interference that we’re – there’s a huge storm about foreign interference. And we don’t really talk about Canada’s interference abroad and that book, I think, may question some of this whole concern about foreign interference. And then, it also, it I think helps to understand whether these – you know, we’re at conflict with China and Russia and Iran and they say it’s because those are authoritarian countries and we believe in democracy. And you say, ‘Well, we’ve been involved with trying to overthrow 20 different governments. Are we really concerned about democracy?’ So, it makes you – I think helps understand that these conflicts with China and Russia and Iran maybe are about something else besides just the question of democracy versus authoritarianism. So, I think the book, you know, helps people make sense of some of the current foreign policy, but it’s also, I think, just an important history.

I just did a few events in Southern Ontario. There’s a couple upcoming events in Kingston, in Saskatoon. And then, I’m going to be doing events out in Vancouver, Vancouver Island, and then throughout the prairies in early and mid-June. So, anyone listening you can check out my website for upcoming information on the events.

GR: Okay. Always a pleasure having you on. Thank you very much for appearing on the show, Yves.

YE: Thank you.

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