

## Research article

# Brebner's *North Atlantic Triangle* at 80: A (Second) Retrospective Look at a Retrospective Book

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## Abstract

Does Brebner's classic study of Canadian grand strategy penned during the period of the Second World War continue to possess any ongoing policy meaning for Canada? This article argues the perhaps counterintuitive proposition that not only is Brebnerian imagery of continued relevance to Canadian strategic culture, but its importance has also increased in recent years. This is because the postulated alternative regional foci that were mooted in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War's ending have, for reasons discussed in this article, turned out to deliver fewer ontological and material 'payoffs' than initially anticipated.

**Keywords** grand strategy; strategic culture; atlanticism; Holmesianism; Porfirianism.

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Interestingly, in a manner not so different from that of their

that I embarked upon a research project that had at its core the triangle metaphor. The results of that research appeared in print 25 years ago under the title *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited: Canadian grand strategy at century's end*.<sup>6</sup> This article is intended to be a retrospective on that retrospective, in which I try to determine how much has and has not changed since I first conceived the project in 1996 and whether the time has finally arrived for the concept to be set aside.

## Strategic culture and the North Atlantic Triangle

I am a political scientist, not an historian, but I confess to a strong belief that history, even and perhaps especially for political scientists, must 'matter'. How it should matter, of course, is not easy to determine. In my 2000 monograph, I thought that guidance could be had from the symbolic depiction of the past; in other words, I was attempting to import 'cultural' analysis into my study of Canadian foreign policy and to look for meaning in what I hoped would be a systematic analysis of symbols because, as Michael Walzer once so elegantly put it, symbols and images tell us 'much more than we can easily repeat'.<sup>7</sup> Since I wrote the book, I have come to realise that the approach I had taken could be lodged under the rubric of 'strategic culture', currently in vogue among some students of international relations.<sup>8</sup>

Now, strategic culture is hardly a straightforward concept and that it has been experiencing a burst of popularity in some scholarly quarters of late does not detract from the reality of its being surrounded by more than a bit of semantic and logical confusion. At the risk of oversimplifying, let us say that among those, such as myself, who profess to be labouring in the vineyards of strategic culture, there are two principal means of harvesting the crop: some prefer to take their concept to refer first and foremost to 'context', by which they mean to apply culture to help them explicate a given state's policy record in terms either of (1) how that state has acted in the past (namely, its previous behaviour is argued to have great, possibly determinative, bearing on its current and future options), or (2) how that state is thought by its own and other peoples as being likely to act based on the 'way we are' (namely, its identity, or character, is said to predispose it towards certain policies).

Other culturalists, however, like to put the emphasis elsewhere, on 'cognition', albeit while recognising that the boundary line between context and cognition can at times be a blurry one. It was in this second,

cognitive, camp that my work on the triangle landed me. One of the merits of the cognitive approach is that it enables strategic culturalists to build on earlier work in the discipline of political science centred upon the cognate category of 'political culture'. And what they most hope to come up with is a means of 'operationalising' strategic culture.

For just as strategic culture is today, political culture used itself to be marred by definitional confusion; indeed, one critic observed that there were almost as many different meanings of political culture as there were political scientists professing an interest in it.<sup>9</sup> When it first burst on the scene in political science, during the 1930s and 1940s, it was as a result of the same interdisciplinary transfusion process that would later bring culture into the purview of those who contemplated strategy; by 1956, some two decades earlier than in the case of strategic culture, 'political culture' even acquired a name. However, while Gabriel Almond might have told us what we should call this category of analysis, he could not decree what it meant. Debate continued as to whether it was to signify the 'generalised personality' of a people, or the collectivity's history, or something else altogether. By the late 1960s, terminological mayhem had political culture well on the way to the conceptual dust heap.<sup>10</sup>

Political culture's rebound owed a bit to changes in the international system attending the Cold War's end, but it was primarily discontent on the part of some analysts with rational-choice modelling and game theory that gave the concept a new lease on life in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup> For while the concept might have taken a nose dive in the late 1960s and early 1970s, its core question – namely, how to tap the subjective orientations of societies' members so as to account for political differences cross-nationally – never had gone out of fashion.<sup>12</sup> What had changed in the period between the decline and re-emergence of political culture was that a new element had been injected into the discussions of political scientists when they pondered how to assess 'culture'. That element was symbolism.

Symbolism helped resuscitate political culture in two ways. First, it solved the 'level-of-analysis' problem hobbling political culture, for much of the early work by Almond and his associates relied upon survey data that, while it might indicate much of value about the perceptions and psychological state of individuals, seemed incapable of generating usable knowledge about the cognitive patterns of collectivities. Individuals, after all, had personalities, but only collectivities could be said to possess cultures and the trick was to find a way to go from the individual to the collective level of analysis if culture was to mean anything. Symbolism

provided the answer, enabling theorists to explore the social ideas of individuals.<sup>13</sup> Symbolism could do this because of its second major contribution, which was to draw us to the cognitive devices that social

unknown, we must resort to concepts that we know and understand, and that is the essence of metaphor – an unusual juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar'.<sup>16</sup>

Yet political scientist Andrew Fenton Cooper has noted that the analytical use of metaphor, no matter the insights it may have sparked elsewhere than in Canada among those who specialise in international relations, has not had much impact on the study of Canadian foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> In light of the lengthy service the constellation of metaphors associated with the North Atlantic Triangle has had in policy debates,



historians Brian McKercher and Lawrence Aronsen believe that this metaphor first assumed policy import in the aftermath of the Imperial Conference of 1926, and did so as a result of Mackenzie King's desire to play the role of mediator and interpreter between the Americans and the British.<sup>18</sup> Other scholars believe the origins of the North Atlantic Triangle to reside in the more distant past and to be more directly rooted in security – some say survival – considerations.

Even if the naming of the metaphor had to await the publication of Brebner's 1945 classic, the thought behind it stretches further back into history. John Holmes maintained that the thought – in both its descriptive and evaluative content – originated in the 1880s and was simply another way of recognising what would later be implied by 'atlanticism', a cognate figure of speech appropriated for the purpose of specifying the geographic and even normative setting of Canadian foreign policy. But Brebner himself dated the metaphor to 1871 and the Treaty of Washington, and in this claim he is not alone. Robert Wolfe has likewise discerned atlanticism's descriptive and evaluative content to reside in that earlier pact and not, as is more customarily maintained, in another Treaty of Washington, the 1949 one creating the Atlantic alliance.<sup>19</sup>

A few even trace the metaphor and its transoceanic derivative, atlanticism, to the eighteenth not the nineteenth century. For Kim Richard Nossal, atlanticism in the Canadian context means that Canada is (or was) in some sense a 'European nation', a self-identification that took on meaning with the 'defining decision of the 1770s not to follow the United States into independence'.<sup>20</sup> Frank Underhill, in the same vein, identifies the American Revolution and its ending in 1783 as marking the onset of an era in which Canada's very existence would depend upon the skilful manipulation of the North Atlantic Triangle.<sup>21</sup>

I think one can err by pushing back too far in time the onset of the age in which conscious manipulation of the Triangle characterised Canadian policy. Accordingly, I suggest we regard the post-Confederation period as marking the beginning of the 'triangularisation' of Canadian diplomacy. To begin with, it would be more than a bit premature to speak of a Canadian diplomatic manipulation of the North Atlantic Triangle – at least insofar as concerned the 'high politics' of security – prior to the founding of the country itself, and this even though a political unit called Canada did pre-exist today's federation of the same name. Moreover, the context of Canadian strategising did alter after 1871, for the treaty of that year resolved a variety of contentious issues between Britain and America, and in so doing reduced greatly (though did not eliminate

entirely) the worry that the United States might seize or otherwise aggress against Canada as part of a broader struggle with Britain. In Underhill's suggestive phrase, the 1871 treaty brought to an end the



Counterpoise, or counterbalancing, would in turn come to be expressed through yet another derivative metaphor, the 'counterweight'.

political balancing, whether there could be any knowable consequences of the strategy. How could one be certain that a counterweight effect was stemming from a counterweight strategy, when the 'dependent variable' was so difficult to define and measure?

More problematic were two other dimensions of counterweight diplomacy, the economic and military. Let us start with the latter. Although no one seriously believed that Canada would or should seek a military counterweight to the United States – which was, after all, its closest ally during the Cold War – there was, as I indicated above, a military cost associated with striving for political and economic counterpoise in Europe. The problem with trying to use defence assets to secure political (counterweight) gains is that it is possible to quantify defence costs, yet impossible to quantify the political gains of a counterweight strategy. Allocating scarce funds to defence is hard enough in Canada when there is a security threat against which defence assets

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of Brebner's metaphor. Although the defensive applications of metaphor were the ones most frequently encountered during the first several decades of Canadian statehood, they did not exhaust the inventory of policy ideas associated with the North Atlantic Triangle. It would take some time, naturally enough, before Canadians could start to conjure more imaginative purposes to which the metaphor might give rise, in the process generating other figurative means of expressing policy goals transcending those associated with the logic of defensive-positionalism, concerned as it was with matters of survival and security-driven power balancing.

Those policy ends can be grouped into two categories. One included normative-aspirational objectives linked to the enhancement of Canadian diplomatic status. What would evolve from this employment of metaphor was a reinforcement of incipient views as to the merits of Canada's aspiring to a 'middle power' role in world politics. The other set consisted in the desire to tap US military and economic strength as a means of advancing both particular Canadian interests and more diffuse world-order goals. In the case of both sets of objectives, one derivative metaphor stood out above all the rest, the 'linchpin' (supplemented, as time went on, with the images of the 'bridge' and, especially, of 'atlanticism'). What the bookkeeper's puzzle and the counterweight were to defensive-positionalism, the linchpin, bridge and atlanticism would be to imaginative-generative diplomacy.

Atlanticism, in particular, served Canada well and if there was a clear defensive aspect to it (namely, the counterweight), there was even more of an imaginative-generative cast to it. Through atlanticism, Canada was able to assist in constructing an arrangement thought capable not only of 'balancing' the United States but also of enabling Canada and other allies to tap into and utilise for their own ends American power. John Holmes expressed this side of the imaginative-generative coin as well as anyone in recalling the aspiration of Canadian diplomats in the early post-Second World War



enhanced Canadian concentration upon their district of professional specialisation and emotional commitment mixed it up with each other in a lively geopolitical jamboree.

What Kahn, one of the pre-eminent American strategic gurus of the Cold War period, no doubt meant was that Canada was one of the world's ranking countries, as indeed it was then and, in many ways, remained in the early 1990s; and were it not for the fact that it lived in the overwhelming shadow of the United States, its aggregate capabilities would have endowed it with the wherewithal (if not necessarily the will) to stake out a claim for regional pre-eminence. For sure, the government of Canada, in official professions of strategy, preferred to give a wide berth to regional modes of conceptualising roles; to hear it said by those in power in Ottawa, Canada had a universalistic strategy, such that it became unnecessary and even counterproductive to attempt to appraise parts of the world on the basis of their particular importance to Canadian interests.

Of cial statements to the contrary notwithstanding the ground was thick with advocacies for providing a regional focus to strategy, mainly grouped in a trio of camps that pitted atlanticists, Asia-Pacificists and Western hemispherists against each other. The latter could in turn be divided into two groups, those few for whom the United States alone represented or should represent the Polariducti4snadi(o s)3(tr)-1(at)10(egy)62 17 tne



which had resulted in the reorientation of the Canadian economy from its traditional East–West and transatlantic axis towards a North–South, and continental, one. What two authors have recently argued in respect of the Ontarian economy applies *a fortiori* to the Canadian one: it has gone from being a ‘heartland’ of the commercial empire of the St Lawrence basin to a ‘regional state’ of the North American economy.<sup>30</sup> Emblematic of this shift had been the relative proportions of goods and services exchanged within the continent as opposed to across the ocean: in 1984, the value of Canadian exports to the United States was already 11 times greater than the value of the country’s exports to the

For all of these reasons, then, it seemed as if Europe could hardly

Even more problematic was the tendency of many analysts to succumb to the fallacy of projection and assume that conditions of today would continue to be relevant tomorrow. Back in the 1960s, Brazilians had a way of disarming enthusiasts of their country's prospects with the Pickwickian boast that Brazil was the land of the future – and always would be! The same looked like it deserved to be said of the Asia-Pacific after the profound collapse of the region's 'miracle' economies that set in with the currency crisis in Thailand during the summer of 1997.

And what of the case for a growing concentration upon the western hemisphere? In many ways, it mirrored the Asia-Pacific advocacy. To the extent that the hemispherists limited their focus to the Americas north of the Rio Grande, it might even be said that they carried the day, based solely on a reading of material factors, such as trade and investment flows. But few of the hemispherists were prepared to stop at the Texas-Mexico border and their advocacy really did have to be assessed in terms not of Canadian-American relations but of Canadian-American-Latin American ones.

As with the Asia-Pacificists, there was an assumption that economic regionalisation was occurring, was deepening and had enormous implications for Canada, whose region was being said, more and more, to be 'the Americas'. Although contemporary commercial statistics could not support the contention that Latin America had in fact emerged as a major area of Canadian economic activity, recent political arrangements, including the formation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the conclusion of a bilateral free trade agreement with Chile, held out two hopes. The first was that the Americas would assume more importance for Canadian economic interests, to the benefit both of Canada and Latin America. And the second was that the flame of a rules-based, multilateral, free trade order could be kept burning against the impending threat of regionalised trade elsewhere in the world and this through the fomenting of a *gi Bme*

to make a materialistic, 'objective' case for the ongoing centrality of the North Atlantic Triangle to Canadian strategy, it would not have been all that difficult, given that the United States is itself one of the angles of the North Atlantic Triangle.

Nor did it in any way follow that a country whose population was becoming less 'European' had to be disengaging itself from atlanticist values. Survey data in the 1990s revealed that Canadian public opinion remained solidly atlanticist and that there were only marginal differences in the support shown for atlanticism on the part of the country's 'Asian' or other non-European population.<sup>33</sup>

In the end, not only did the mooted economic and demographic changes of the post-Cold War decade fail to reorient Canada decisively away from the familiar confines of the North Atlantic Triangle, but they were incapable of preventing a relative deepening of Canada's transatlantic ties in the security domain. At the start of the 1990s, no one could have foreseen that a decade after the ending of the Cold War, Canada would still have a significant proportion of its armed forces deployed in Europe. No one could have imagined that NATO would remain the central vehicle for the promotion of Canada's transatlantic and, perhaps global, security agenda – even becoming stylised, on the eve of the Kosovo War in early 1999, as the 'human security alliance' *par excellence*. But improbable as it seemed in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, NATO would become reconceptualised for a Canada that, in 1999, not only was waging war in Europe but was playing a much greater part in security operations in the Balkans than even Germany, and nearly equalling, in its contribution to the aerial campaign against the Serbs, the efforts of Britain and France.<sup>34</sup>

off the Brebnerian metaphor were either misguided or, more charitably, premature in their judgements. Seven years later, I remain uncertain as to which it is, though I suspect it may well turn out to have been the latter.

Many things have changed since the book's publication in 2000, the most important being the alteration in the threat environment. And even if not all of America's allies share its assessment of the threat (how could they, as they were not targeted on 11 September 2001?), all understand that an aroused America, seeing itself to be very much at war, is going to be a different kind of partner for them. Some allies, as the 2003 Iraq War showed, were prepared to differ radically from the perspective of Washington, making the Kosovo conflict look, in retrospect, to have been a model of interallied harmony (which it really was not). Other allies, the majority of them as it turned out, supported the United States in the decision to go to war, a few even helping militarily.

Canada was caught in a bind, to put it mildly, by that war. Sharing a continent with an America that was demonstrably in the cross-hairs of terrorism made it both wise and necessary for Canada to be – and to be seen to be – a committed partner in the job of securing the North American homeland. But outside North America, as the Iraq War showed, Canada could and did develop a different assessment of threat and response from Washington's, agreeing with its large ally on the need for military action in Afghanistan as part of the GWOT but disagreeing that Iraq was a necessary front in that struggle.

Not surprisingly, the downturn in relations with the United States has led some in Canada to envision, once again, some kind of 'counterweight' being found in Europe and particularly in the 'old Europe' that had opposed the Iraq War. This mood has been bolstered by an increase in the number of Canadians who were prepared to look for, and find, growing divergences in social 'values' between themselves and their American neighbours, so that Canada was being increasingly regarded by Canadians as at least as much of a European entity as a (North) American one: in Lawrence Martin's words, 'in the struggle for our future, Canada will remain as close to the European model as the American one, which is the way, it seems, the people prefer it'.<sup>36</sup>

In a manner not seen in the 1990s, when Canadian strategy was characterised by an underlying 'Holmesian' preference for working with the United States so as to enable Canada to avail itself of American power as a means of achieving Canadian ends (namely, combatting ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, or spreading the 'zone of peace'



democracy, the rule of law, respect for minority rights and reliance upon market economic forces accompanied by a societal safety net. This value set is an historical legacy whose geographic heartland was, even if it does not remain, the North Atlantic Triangle. It is a value set that Ottawa, if it only could, would disseminate as widely as possible throughout the world. And it is a value set that has been given renewed emphasis in the latest IPS, where the 'fundamental interests' of Canada are now being identified as prosperity, security and responsibility, with the latter understood as implying the aim of bringing to others the quality of 'good governance' that Canada is thought to enjoy.<sup>39</sup>

## Postscript: Brebner at 80

As I write these words today, in 2024, it strikes me that I was being far too timid, in both the 2000 book and the first retrospective assessment of it five years later: if the triangle metaphor had, as I suggested, become transfigured through the complementary symbolism of atlanticism, then 'Brebnerianism' is more than alive today. It is alive and kicking, as the transatlantic dimension of Canadian foreign policy continues palpably to be the most vibrant stage upon which Canadian security and defence planning takes place; illustratively, it remains the most relevant site of what foreign military deployments the Canadian Armed Forces undertake. Much more than at either the beginning of the 1990s or even the midpoint in our new century's first decade, Canadian grand strategy continues to be anchored to NATO. This recentring upon the transatlantic alliance, of course, has a lot to do with Vladimir Putin's unintended reinvigoration of the alliance, through his decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022.

But there are some other developments that have also resulted in the anchoring. First, the 'China dream' of the post-Cold War era has turned into a Canadian nightmare. Few in Ottawa today entertain visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads when thoughts turn to China – visions that at one time were easy and, quite possibly, obligatory – to entertain within the policymaking community. Instead, that community now contemplates the meaning of China for Canadian interests much more as threat and much less as promise, given how Xi Jinping's 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy has made of Beijing a worrisome token of a future order in which great power trumps all other considerations, including and especially those associated with liberal-democratic values.





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**The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.**

## Notes





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