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Canada's New Defence Policy: The Short Version

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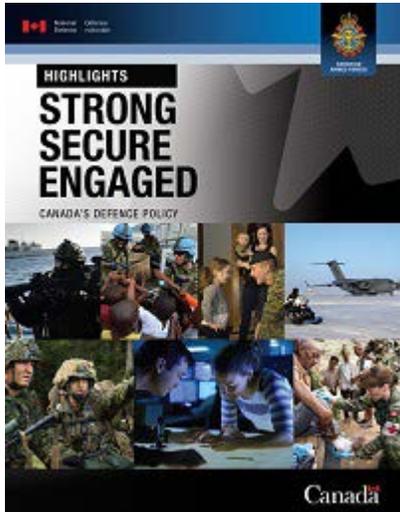
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This article is one of a series of short, focused analyses of the new Canadian Defence Policy "Strong, Secure, Engaged" which was launched in June 2017. In this article, Stéphanie von Hlatky and Kim Richard Nossal highlight how consultation, a focus on people and an aggressive posture on re-investment loaded well into the future, mark this Defence Policy from its predecessors.

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Canada's New Defence Policy: The Short Version

By Stéfanie von Hlatky and Kim Richard Nossal

Every new prime minister who has come to power since 1964 has sought to articulate a “new” defence policy for Canada. The broad lines of policy do not differ much from one review to the next: since the 1950s, Canadian defence policy has stressed home defence, continental defence cooperation with the United States, and military engagement beyond the North American continent. Not surprisingly, the defence policy of the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau embraces as its guiding slogan: “Strong at home, secure in North America, engaged in the world.” The previous defence reviews — in 1964, 1971, 1987, 1995, 2005, and 2008 — said much the same thing.

But if this strategic formulation does not strike the “bold new vision” claimed by the minister of national defence, Harjit Sajjan, the defence policy does set out new courses of action.

First, the Trudeau government returned to the consultative process for defence review put in place by the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney in the 1980s, and enhanced by the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien in the 1990s. But it has embraced consultation with a vengeance. The desire for consultation was genuine, with some members of the government claiming that consultation is now in the Liberal Party’s DNA. From an active presence on social media to launching high-profile consultative processes to revamp policy portfolios, Trudeau’s first year and a half has been characterized by stakeholder engagement to assist in these efforts. Of course, consultation can also be incredibly time-consuming, and that much was obvious in the making of the 2016-2017 Defence Policy Review. Imagine the monumental task of sifting through 20,200 submissions, from the online workbooks and discussion forums that were set up in the summer of 2016. In addition to the online platforms and Twitter discussions (#defenceconsults), this process gathered the input of 4,700 people. In addition, another 107 participants took part in expert roundtables to provide in-depth feedback on the traditional pillars of defence policy: personnel, equipment and operations.

One major departure was the embrace by the government of the idea that military personnel is a crucial part of defence policy. To be sure, the phrase “people are our most important asset” rolls easily enough off the tongue so that it runs the risk of becoming a cliché, but crafting a comprehensive strategy to improve the environment for the professional military was notably absent from the 2008 Canada First Defence Strategy put out by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. The Trudeau government’s new defence policy, in contrast, promises “unprecedented support to our people and their families”. More than half of the defence budget is already set aside for military personnel. The policy creates new resources to address mental health issues, to better plan for military-to-civilian military transitions and to make military service easier on families. Moreover, the theme of diversity can be felt across the various personnel-focused objectives. This promises to contribute to repairing the military’s reputation after the damaging Deschamps report on sexual misconduct in the military. For example, the policy

launches new recruitment efforts for women, to reach the goal of 25 percent of women in the armed forces by 2026 (the CAF currently has about 15 percent). More broadly, a diverse CAF is about building a military that resembles the population it serves: more women, more visible minorities, more indigenous peoples, etc. Beyond diversity, the CAF also wants to be an employer of choice, since it needs to compete for talent with other sectors, offering better compensation for deployments and more flexibility to servicemen and women who want to alternate between military service and other pursuits, professional or personal. What remains to be seen is how this will be communicated to Canadians (be on standby for a new recruitment campaign) and whether this will have an impact at the recruiting centres.

A second major departure was to be found in the way in which the Liberal government is proposing to reinvest in and modernize the core capabilities of the Canadian Armed Forces. Importantly, the government recognized that the CAF's capabilities are in parlous shape as a result of the failure of previous governments, Liberal and Conservative, to complete needed defence procurement in a timely and cost-efficient way. The promise of reinvestment was as close to full-spectrum as one could imagine in a Canadian context. For the Royal Canadian Navy, fifteen surface combatants, two joint support ships, five to six Arctic offshore patrol ships, a modernized Victoria-class submarine fleet, with enhanced intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and armament systems. For the Canadian Army, modernization across systems, with a commitment to increase Arctic mobility and ability to operate in remote regions. For the Royal Canadian Air Force, there was the promise of a new fighter fleet, fully 23 more than the 65 that had been the previous size of the fleet. In addition, next generation multi-mission planes to replace the CP-140 Auroras and new air-to-air tankers, new utility transports, and new remotely piloted systems were added. New joint capabilities were promised. And the defence review plans to recapitalize and modernize Canada's Special Operations Forces. To acquire these systems, the Trudeau government proposed to increase Canada's annual defence spending on a cash basis from \$18.9 billion in 2016-17 to \$32.7 billion by 2026-27, a massive increase of 70 percent, unprecedented in times of peace. Importantly, a total of \$33.8 billion was committed for the acquisition of capital assets over the twenty years from 2017-18 to 2036-37.

However, the real departure from past practice embraced by the Trudeau government was that this massive reinvestment was carefully costed out, with the review at pains to demonstrate the differences between funding on an accrual basis versus a cash basis. But while the government is to be commended for its efforts to explain the intricacies of defence funding, there can be no escaping the reality that the recapitalization of the CAF is all loaded far into the future, and well beyond the next election. Populating an Excel spreadsheet with twenty years of columns, and then filling them with impressive-sounding numbers is easy. However, we should recognize that promising Canadians in 2017 that the defence budget in 2031-31, for example, will be \$30 billion is little more than a 6/49 "imagine the freedom" exercise, divorced from the reality that it will be the government elected (or re-elected) in 2019 that will have to grapple with the huge deficits run by the Trudeau government in its first term. Previous governments were in the habit of writing big defence shopping lists — think of the Mulroney government's decision to buy 12 nuclear-powered submarines, or the Harper government's 2008 Canada First Defence Strategy shopping list — but they never wrote shopping lists that were so unambiguously to be paid for by some future government.

This will have considerable consequences in the short and medium terms. At National Defence Headquarters, policymakers always fret over how changes in Canada's defence policy will be perceived by allies. But do our allies pay close enough attention? In Brussels, the NATO Secretary General is keen to reinforce a core message: allies must spend more and better when it comes to defence. In the US, the message has been somewhat less tactful of late. President Donald Trump declared NATO "obsolete," and then "not obsolete," but he still talks about the other allies "owing" the United States massive sums in defence spending. With his presidency, the environment has become much more unpredictable. And with unpredictability comes risk aversion and this is quite obvious when examining the new Canadian defence policy's budgetary promises over the next twenty years. Some may argue that the mere promise of a 70 percent increase might be enough. After all, the public relations efforts of both the prime minister and his minister of national defence seem to be paying off: allies are praising Canada for committing more defence dollars. Policy wonks will point out that Canada still won't be meeting the "2 percent pledge," i.e. the NATO commitment that has allies spending 2 percent of their GDP on defence by 2024.

But, like most things at NATO, those are commitments not obligations. There is no enforcement mechanism beyond public shaming. In addition to the 2 percent pledge, there is also the target of spending 20 percent of the national defence budget on major equipment — and this is a target which Canada is poised to meet. Moreover, how allies use their assets to support Alliance goals is crucial for allied perceptions. Whether it's NATO, coalition operations or UN operations, allies and partners pay attention to boots on the ground: the best allies contribute when asked, are self-sustaining in theater and, preferably, do not have an exit strategy. On this front, Canada has been a steady partner in the last decade. Ottawa is also sending signals that this will continue: leading a NATO battlegroup in Latvia, supporting the US in its defeat of ISIS in Iraq and making troops available for other operations should the need arise, as outlined in the new defence policy. The CAF is visible — and that counts.

But the longer-term problem still remains: the Canadian Armed Forces are in need of a major reinvestment and modernization sooner rather than later, and while this defence review promises a lot, particularly its promise to pay significant attention to personnel, it does not provide the CAF with the capabilities that it needs in the short to medium term to be strong at home, secure in North America, and engaged in the world.

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