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A DEFENCE REVIEW?
NOT REALLY NECESSARY:
BUT IF CANADA NECESSARILY MUST,
HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN
MIND AND TO AVOID

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April | avril 2016

As the famous song from *Showboat* goes: “Birds got to fly, fish got to swim,” to which it might be added, that newly elected Canadian governments, especially Liberal ones, feel that they ‘gotta’ have a defence policy review. So it is no surprise that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has instructed the Minister of National Defence Harjit Sajjan to: “Conduct an open and transparent review process to create a new defence strategy for Canada, replacing the now-outdated Canada First Defence Strategy.” And indeed in April the Minister announced that the review would be led by a blue-ribbon advisory panel.

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public involvement. The new government has a strong mandate to govern. It should just announce its defence policies. However since an “open and transparent” process is going to happen anyway, here are some things to keep in mind during the public discussions to come and, more importantly, some things that should be avoided.

What will constitute the desirable characteristics of the new policy is already a matter of familiar debate — just as familiar as the brochure with snappy production values that inevitably will appear and remain for a period of time on bureaucratic desks and departmental websites, only to disappear to all in coming years except to professors and their students looking for paper topics. After the last two governments gave their policies slogans (“*A place of pride and influence*” and “*Canada First*”) the Trudeau government will also feel so obliged. It will probably be something along the lines of “Canada is back” or something to do with “Canadian values.”

For those convinced that Canada has (again) allowed its armed forces to deteriorate and that Ottawa’s commitment to collective western defence is (once more) lagging, there is the hope that the defence review will demonstrate that the government needs to invest more heavily in the Canadian Armed Forces and step-up its contributions of hard military assets to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) and whatever United States led coalitions-of-the-willing will inevitably arise in the future. In contrast, there is a considerable, if not dominant, body of opinion (in part encouraged by Mr. Trudeau’s own statements) that it is time for Canada to turn its back on the policies of the previous Harper administration and turn back to its true and distinctive (un-American) approach to defence policy. This would entail a marked re-commitment to broad, multilateral collective security, especially through greater participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations in keeping with Liberal promises during the fall election. This view would mandate an increase in overseas commitments, but without the need for extensive expenditures and the hard military assets required to al-

low the military to be able to operate with Canada's principal western allies. Both groups will advocate the continued importance of the military's role in defending Canadian sovereignty and providing aid of the civil-power

In other words, the defence review process will reprise the same arguments that characterized previous examinations of policy and posture throughout the Cold War, post-Cold War, and post-9/11 eras, which all had their individual and short-lived emphasis but in the long did not change the fundamentals of Canadian defence policy. In the end, Canada's new defence policy will encompass commitments to NATO (and other western collective efforts), NORAD (and co-operation with the US with regard to general North American security), contributions to UN peacekeeping operations (however defined), and a role in the protection of national sovereignty along with support in a wide range of domestic activities.

And, notwithstanding the continued North American and national roles of the past, the Canadian strategic culture and the posture of the armed forces will remain largely expeditionary in orientation. If not for the actual security of the country, such an overseas emphasis to defence policy is integral to the official and public desire that Canada play a role in the world and bring Ottawa's influence to bear on international crises and problems. This is one point on which the pro-western collective defence and the pro-multilateral collective security advocates have always agreed. Canadian defence policy has never and can never be based upon a "Canada First" approach, because it is only in the broader international context that the country has any real defence problem necessitating modern armed forces of whatever composition.

To be sure, the new statement may, as in the past, be written such as to focus the written emphasis on one of the four traditional roles and be accompanied by government rhetoric to give the impression a major shift in orientation. But however worded and explained, the Canadian Armed Forces will continue to perform the basic functions they have been called upon to undertake since World War II. Any change in emphasis (both as to specific operations and where they take place) will not be the result of the new defence review, but in response to immediate policy priorities – priorities that will, as before, be mainly dictated by broader global events and how other countries and international organizations respond to them.

And what will the military have in terms of equipment and weapons to meet these unforeseen future exigencies? It can be said that whatever the defence review concludes, Canada will continue to have an Army, Navy and Air Force which will each have some capacity to perform various domestic, North American, and especially overseas operations. Of course it can be argued that the overseas operations unlike the domestic and North American ones are discretionary. However, it is hard to see how any

Canadian government, including the present one, would want to excise the option of substantially abandoning an expeditionary capability of whatever magnitude or composition.

What is more, it is almost certain that the fate of current and future procurements will have almost nothing to do with the outcome of the defence review. This is so because the review will not fundamentally change defence policy and the roles of the CAF and, more importantly, because, apart from budgetary-driven reductions in the number of platforms and systems acquired, scaling down the capabilities and delays in acquisitions (already announced in the recent budget) the Trudeau government is unlikely to abandon any of the current major procurement plans to meet those roles. Indeed, given the sunk costs and the lengthy procurement process, the future defence force posture, which in theory should come out of the defence review, is already foretold.

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Even if the review is not going to yield a substantially altered Canadian approach to defence policy then, given that one seems necessary simply because it is expected, then at least the process and resulting new statement can be redeemed by avoiding four intellectually suspect and irritatingly erroneous approaches to thinking about defence policy.

‘Threatism’: A useful defence review cannot be based on an exaggerated and unrealistic threat assessment. Many parts of the world are experiencing severe civil conflict, economic and governmental collapse, humanitarian crisis, and war. But almost none of these (in many cases man-made problems) pose an existential threat to the physical security, economic well-being, and stability of Canada. Ottawa can and should adopt defence policies which make use of the Canadian Armed Forces to help ameliorate some of these problems in concert with other like-minded governments and international organizations, as it is currently doing in Iraq and Syria. But the reality is that for Canada and much of the West, the strategic threat level is far less than it was during the Cold War when we were faced with a hostile superpower adversary and the prospect of nuclear annihilation. And while there may be some benefit to other countries if Canada were to engage more in multilateral aid and peacekeeping through the UN, these remain actions of choice not necessity, as morally justified as they may be.

“Grand Strategyism”: The charge that Canadian leaders will or not cannot think “strategically” has been a staple of discussion on defence policy for decades, especially from those who believe that governments do not take threats seriously; otherwise they would spend more on the military. The solution is often a call for grand strategy. There are many differing definitions of what constitutes grand strategy. Most usually involve bolstering national security, by coordinating policy across mul-

multiple government departments, assessing ends and means in order to achieve a clear and credible policy outcome, particularly when it relates to the military instrument. Once again calls to adopt this approach are being heard as the defence policy review approaches. But these should be avoided for several reasons.

First of all, Canada already has a grand strategy when it comes to defence; it is just not that grand. It essentially involves doing “just enough” to maintain a reasonable military posture to maintain effectiveness in a limited number of scenarios and being able to contribute to larger multilateral (whether collective defence or security) operations. Here Canada’s leaders have followed the dictates of grand strategy making: Not prepared to commit excessive resources to the means they have avoided multiplying the ends and committing excessive means.

Second, in the absence of compelling existential threats to national security, one is not needed. Defence is simply not high enough on the public policy agenda to warrant the major effort it would take to coordinate across government in order to markedly augment the military posture.

Third, absent a major existential threat to the country, which would impose the urgency and discipline needed for a pan-government coordinated effort, grand strategic approaches will not work. When is the last time the government of Canada successfully coordinated all branches of government, getting the entire bureaucracy on the same page, to achieve a specific policy outcome? Even worse, the search for a “whole of government” approach to anything, let alone military matters, can often result in a ‘hole’ of government outcome – wherein the process of trying to coordinate every aspect of public policy bearing upon an issue, and getting all the “stakeholders” to agree, results in nothing meaningful being achieved.

Finally, whatever the theoretical strategists may say, the inherent contradictions between national objectives in distinct policy areas are sometimes impossible to avoid. For example, it is argued that Canada must take the threat from China more seriously and the defence review must result in added resources and increase commitments to the Asia-Pacific region. But at the same time, Ottawa’s foreign economic policy includes trying to open up China to more Canadian products especially oil and gas and courting Chinese investment in Canada, measures which will only fuel China’s economic growth and with that growth a larger military. Of course, Canada, like the United States, has a self-interest in both checking Chinese military power and in a growing Chinese economy. The challenge is therefore, not to find the right grand strategy that will solve all your problems, but to learn to adjust to the inevitable ‘grand contradictions’ inherent in any defence policy.

“Laggardism”: Implicit in the calls for a defence review coming from those, both pro-hard power collective defence and those pro-multilateral soft power collective security, is the belief that Canada has

been an unremitting laggard when it comes to living up to its international commitments. Ottawa has either done too little to support our US-led allies or too much at the cost of being able to contribute appropriately to the UN and other non-western efforts. But this is simply not the case. The Canadian Armed Forces have maintained a high-tempo of overseas military and/or humanitarian operations since the end of the Cold War over a quarter of a century ago. To which other comparable country are the Canadian contributions to natural disasters, collective defence and security, and regional and global stability – in terms of treasure and especially blood – can Canadian efforts be measured and found wanting? The defence review cannot begin with an apologia for the level of Canada's global engagement and recommend an unrealistic increase in those commitments. Indeed, notwithstanding the “how much is enough” tradition, some Canada's defence problems arise not from a lack of com-

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‘Clichéism’: One of the reasons why people feel impelled to point to alleged Canadian laggardism is the gap between rhetoric and reality in Canadian foreign and defence policy. And this disconnection arises because of the many boilerplate, over-used, unrealistic clichés to describe Canada's role in the world: “The world needs more Canada”; only by spending more and doing more will Ottawa gain international influence with its allies; Canada the peacekeeper; Canada the “honest broker”; Canada the un-colonialist, beloved in developing countries for that special virtue; Canada the bridge-builder; “punching above our weight”; and the ever popular, Canada with the unique (read un-American) approach to global problems, among others. Such over-used clichés are frequently used invoked to justify the need for increased or decreased expenditure on defence, for greater or lesser commitment to its Western allies but always heightened global engagement.

As noted, according to one previous foreign policy statement, the objective of the Ottawa's international policies should be to achieve (or restore) a place of “pride and influence,” as if pride and influence were the objectives and not the occasional result of successfully making wise decisions grounded in reality. No doubt many parts of the world would benefit from “more Canada,” especially when it means the assistance of the superb Canadian Armed Forces. But defence policy formulation should, in the first instance, be about deciding how much more of the world, and its problems, Canada needs to be involved with in order to maintain its security, prosperity, and stability. And the answer to that question may well be, not much more than the country is presently able or willing to provide. In order to make it possible to reach such a conclusion, the clichés have to be dispensed with.

Perhaps more importantly, these pleasantries are not about how the world actually sees Canada, but

rather about Canadians feeling good about how they think the world see their country. Repeating these clichés conveys false promises which are bound to be unfulfilled, thus engendering unnecessary cynicism and disappointment. The end result is Canadians then feeling bad, even ashamed, about their country's global standing, when they have no reason to do so.

In sum, if a defence review and new policy statement now are unavoidably on the way, it would be well to recall another *Showboat* classic song; "Ol' Man River." Canadian defence policy just keeps 'rollin' along'-NATO, NORAD (Canada-U.S.), some UN peace operations, domestic roles-no matter how much, extensively or how often it is reviewed. Since a review and statement now appear to be inescapable, both could be at least of some value and even achieve a small measure of originality, if they can avoid in print and word the four decidedly unhelpful approaches of threatism, grand strategyism, laggardism, and clichéism. None are needed to explaining and justifying the need for a defence policy and military posture that serves Canadian national interests.

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