

Conference of Defence Associations Institute

STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

CANADA IN DANGEROUS TIMES

Rob Huebert, University of Calgary
in collaboration with Dr. Philippe Lagassé



2025

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March 2025

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On the Cover

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“DP3 Bravo Platoon Commander Course”

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GX11-2019-0015-010

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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

Traditionally, a review of the strategic challenges facing Canada will be discussed with similar themes and recommendations in an orthodox manner. Most reviews and foresight exercise will start by lamenting Canada's difficulties in reaching its defence objectives. Usually, this begins with a consideration of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s 2% requirement set at the Wales NATO summit in 2014. The reviews will then provide an update of the many security challenges that Canada faces and is generally organized along geographical terms—North America and/or Arctic; Indo-Pacific and Europe. **Normally**, there is no conversation about Canadian security without addressing the Canada-U.S. relationship.

However, these are no longer normal times. The core assumption since the 1940 Ogdensburg agreement has been that Canada-U.S. cooperation is the bedrock of Canadian defence and security.¹ Since the beginning of the Cold War, successive defence analysts have pointed out that the fundamental Canadian defence requirement was ensuring that the Americans accepted that Canada was meeting its obligation in the defence of North America. In this regard, Nils Orvik's concept of "Defence against Help" set the tone in 1971. Indeed, he stated that small countries like Canada only needed enough of a military to convince its bigger neighbour that:

even a very small force might be fully credible, provided its objectives are within the limits of its capabilities. One credible objective for small states would be, while not attempting military resistance against a large neighbour, to persuade him that they are strong enough to defend themselves against any of the large neighbour's potential enemies. This could help to avoid the actual military presence of the great neighbour on one's territory for reasons of military 'help' and assistance.²

Since then, there has continued to be a tacit understanding that if Canada pulled its weight in the defence of North America, the shared interest from an economic, cultural and historical context would mean that Canada could solve its core defence problem by doing just enough to keep the Americans satisfied.³

To a large degree, the trust in the Canada-U.S. security relationship allowed successive Canadian leaders to minimize the attention given to defence issues since the end of the Cold War. While there have been important exceptions such as Canadian participation in the War in Afghanistan, the driving feature of Canada's participation was in response to a threat against America and the need to be included at the "table."⁴ Until very recently there has been a shared assumption that Canada faced no direct military threat, and that it could rely on America for protection against any security threat.

Both of these core assumptions of the Post-Cold War era, that Canada faces no direct military threat from adversaries and that Canada can rely on its American friends, are now being challenged and may be collapsing. Since the second phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022,⁵ there has been a growing acceptance that Canada faces military threats from Russia and China. Indeed, the 2024 Defence Policy Update (DPU), *Our North, Strong and Free*, states that "Russia has demonstrated that it is a reckless and hostile adversary willing to undermine peace and stability in pursuit of its goals, which is a reminder that Canadians cannot take global security for granted."⁶ More recently, the Hogue inquiry has publicly named five states that are mounting active misinformation campaigns against Canada, namely, Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan.⁷ Furthermore, a report released by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians ("NSICOP") Report points to even more direct political interference by these states.⁸ Ultimately, what the two reports illustrate is that Canada has moved into an international security environment where it faces states that can be considered enemies and that are actively threatening its security.

Even if these states were not interested in destabilizing or attacking Canada, the threat of international conflict is increasing. If the war in Ukraine is settled as President Trump has suggested – a change of Ukrainian Government, Russian control of conquered territory and no entry of Ukraine into NATO or the EU, then Putin will have fought three wars where he has achieved his main objectives – Chechnya, 1999-2009; Georgia 2008; and Ukraine 2014-2025. Given his successes and threats made against other bordering

states, it seems increasingly likely that he will continue to use force to achieve his objectives. The shifting American position will probably increase this probability.⁹

It is more difficult to offer an assessment of the Chinese response to the rapidly changing international security environment that is being caused by the pivot in American foreign policy under President Trump, and what it means for Canada. While President Trump has been moving closer to Russia, he has repeatedly referred to China as the main threat facing the United States. What remains unclear is whether he perceives this threat in economic terms, military terms, or both. It is also not clear to what extent China is developing their response to the new rhetoric coming from the United States. Yet, China is continuing its military build-up. Indeed, reports from the United States Department of Defense (DOD) cite that China is now building up its nuclear weapons capability.¹⁰ For a long period, they had been content to keep their arsenal stable. However, the Americans now report that they have seen significant increases in the Chinese arsenal – from 300 to 600 – and expect to see this number increase to 1000 by 2030.¹¹ As of now, the full ramifications of this increase in China's nuclear arsenal and its implications for Canada have not been fully considered.

The second challenge to the core security assumptions is based on the Canada-U.S. security relationship that has existed since 1940. The actions and statements by President Trump have cast confusion and concern within Canada. Events are moving so quickly that it is difficult to fully understand the ramifications of his words and actions thus far. First, he has made very clear statements challenging Canadian independence. When he initially suggested that the United States should annex Canada and make it the 51st state, it was thought that he was only joking.¹² It was also thought he was possibly trying to rattle Canadian officials as a means of improving his position with Canada over several issues of importance.¹³ However, he has repeated this suggestion, and it is starting to appear that, even if he does not intend to invade Canada, he does seem to be seeking some extended form of control.¹⁴ He has also begun to move towards undermining Canadian economic security through both the threat to impose and actual imposition of a series of

severe tariffs. At a minimum, he appears determined to dictate to Canada what its policies should be on a wide range of issues, including border control and fentanyl trafficking.¹⁵

The second way Trump is upending the Canada-U.S. relationship is through his disruption of NATO. He is in the process of withdrawing support of Ukraine and, as incredible as it seems, is seemingly shifting toward the Russian position by blaming the war on Ukraine and negotiating directly with Russia. Furthermore, Vice-President J.D. Vance warned Europe at the 2025 Munich Security Conference that the United States expected Europe to bear more of the burden as the Americans realign their focus to other regions such as the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ As a result, the alliance is now in a state of disarray. Since the onset of the Cold War, Canada has always assumed that it could work with the U.S. within the NATO alliance to protect the rules-based international order. President Trump's unilateral actions and those of his officials during the Munich Security Conference means that the European allies are now both blindsided and scrambling to respond, leaving Canada very much on the sidelines.

The Key Issues

In 2025, Canada faces seismic changes to its security. There are three major issues: 1) growing threats to its security; 2) a drastically changing Canada-U.S. security relationship; and 3) domestic political uncertainty.

First, Canada faces growing threats from several foreign states. Russia and China are increasingly being understood to be posing direct military threats, while the actions of other states – India, Pakistan and Iran—are also proving to be increasingly hostile to Canada.

Second, and perhaps even more dangerous, the long-term understanding of the strength and durability of the Canada-U.S. security relationship is now under the most significant threat that it has faced since before the Second World War. For reasons that are not understood, President Trump and his administration seem determined to disrupt and possibly discard this long-term relationship. Canadian defence planners have always based their plans on the health of this re-

lationship. Now, they must re-visit this basic assumption. In the past, differences may have occurred such as over the Americans wars in Vietnam and Iraq, but none of these have ever threatened to upend the relationship to the degree that is occurring now.

Third, and what will be the most short-term, is the existing political uncertainty over the Canadian political landscape. Parliament has been prorogued from January 6 to March 24 to allow the Liberal Party to conduct its search for a new leader—all amid a rapidly transforming international security environment. Looking ahead, the lack of political certainty and the coming election has three major ramifications for Canadian security. First, government actions will be hindered by not knowing who the Prime Minister past March 9 will be and for how long that they will retain the role. Additionally, the uncertainty over the dates of the election will further add to the confusion of any action that the Government can take. Second, for the first time since the 1988 election which centered on the issue of Free Trade with the Americans, both foreign and defence policy will potentially play an important and possibly critical role. The question of who is best suited to respond to President Trump will probably be the key issue. Third, within this complex political environment, the states identified by the Hogue Report will undoubtedly attempt to influence the entire political process. Indeed, nothing in it suggests that the efforts of China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India will decrease. And while prior to Trump's re-election such considerations were unthinkable, it is possible that the United States may also attempt to interfere in the election using misinformation.

Against this backdrop, this Strategic Outlook will now offer insights into four main areas of concern to Canadian security. First, it will examine the present state of Canada-U.S. security relations and what this means going into the future. Second, it will address the challenges surrounding the protection of Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security. Third, it will consider some of the key issues that are occurring in the Indo-Pacific region. Lastly, Dr. Philippe Lagassé will provide an assessment of Canada's procurement policies and actions.

CANADA-U.S. SECURITY RELATIONS

Perhaps the greatest challenge in attempting to understand the future of the Canada-U.S. security relationship is trying to understand where it now stands. The Trump administration seems determined to upend much of the relationship at least at the political level and probably beyond. The traditional action of a newly elected American president regarding Canada has been to set up a time when the two leaders could convene. This has always been prioritized because of the importance of the relationship to both nations. Equally important, it has been used to show the world the strength of the partnership. The actions of President Trump have been the opposite. He almost immediately started talking about annexing Canada and then followed this up with his threat of very severe tariffs. While Prime Minister Trudeau did fly down to meet with him at Mar-a-Lago after his re-election, that was before Trump had taken office and before Trudeau had announced his resignation.¹⁷ Thus, it was not comparable to the normal summit meeting.

In attempting to understand the impact that President Trump's actions will have on the defence relationship, it is necessary to consider three possible outcomes to his current actions. First, it is possible that his rumination about making Canada the 51st state and about the Prime Minister being a U.S. Governor is meant to emulate the strategies outlined in his business book *The Art of the Deal*.¹⁸ This could be nothing more than his efforts to cause confusion and disruption as he prepares to negotiate with Canada. This would suggest that he is currently trying to create conditions in which Canada moves more quickly to deliver on matters he sees in America's favour, ultimately setting up a Canadian government that is more willing to concede on certain issues moving forward. Under such a scenario, it is plausible that the defence and security relationship could return to business-as-usual but with an understanding that Canada speeds up its current efforts to achieve a higher rate of defence spending.

The second possibility is that he is attempting to weaken Canada but not with the intention of ultimately absorbing it into the United States. The United States did defeat and absorb a significant part of Mexi-

co in 1848 at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War. Consequently, it gained seven new states – Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado (and additional lands to Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming). However, the addition of these new states created significant domestic political pressures surrounding the issue of slavery and was a factor that then accelerated the events leading to the Civil War.¹⁹ Despite his political rhetoric, President Trump may understand that by making Canada the 51st state or any number of new states as was the case in 1848, the political landscape of the country would be altered. Just as the addition of the new states in 1848 had an impact on the political decisions affecting the issues surrounding slavery, so too would the addition of Canada presumably alter the political balance that now exists between Republican and Democrat states.

Therefore, it is possible that his actions are meant to weaken Canada into reducing it to a vassal state but not absorbing it. This would be in line with the growing concern that his most recent actions and statements regarding Europe, Ukraine and Russia, are part of a larger effort to recast the world in spheres of influence. In this context, his comments about Canada, Greenland and Panama can better be understood as attempts to consolidate his control over North America. In such an environment, the defence relationship would be determined by the requirements of the United States with a much-weakened Canada doing its best to fulfill them. In some ways, it could come to resemble the relationship between Finland and the USSR during the Cold War.

The third possibility, and the one that seems the most improbable, is that the United States is serious and will move to incorporate Canada as the 51st state. If this were to happen, it would probably be undertaken after an extensive effort on the part of the United States to convince enough Canadians that they wanted to join the U.S. Given the efforts of other countries to interfere in Canada's domestic politics and President Trump's connections to the owners of social media platforms, it is possible that such efforts could be successful. Already, there have been some influential Canadians that seem supportive of the idea.²⁰ At this time there is almost no thought given to the possibility of an armed invasion to force the annexation. But given the vast transformations that are occurring, it may

be prudent to at least consider what that would mean and if there was any type of response possible. The paradox of this threat is that any effort on Canada's part to prepare would probably result in the Americans becoming even more aggressive in their actions towards Canada. Yet, not preparing would make the consequences much worse. Again, the idea that it is even possible to consider such a scenario would have been considered preposterous just a month ago.

Against this array of possibilities, it is now necessary to consider some of the most important specific elements facing the Canada-U.S. defence relationship.

Business as Usual

General Jennie Carignan, current Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), made the very public pronouncement that Canada-U.S. Military relations are stable and very strong.²¹ Her messaging is that relations are progressing as normal, and that is reassuring. Given the depth of the relationship that exists between the armed forces of both countries, the more these ties are maintained, the better the chances of constraining American leadership in its effort to disturb the overall relationship.

However, as part of the effort to reorganize the American government, Trump has authorized Elon Musk to head the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). While the authority to create such a body with its mandate to reduce waste and inefficiencies within Government is now beginning to be challenged through the American court system, it has already been able to make significant cuts to the workforce. Its mandates cover U.S. DOD, and the department is expecting to see cuts occurring in its workforce.²²

These cuts will have an important consequence on the department's relations with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). As the Trump administration demonstrates its ability to eliminate personnel, the willingness of individuals to move beyond the direction of the one explicitly determined by the President will be reduced.²³ Thus, as individuals realize the fragility of the tenure of their employment, they will not go beyond their mandate. This means that the traditional hope that political leaders can be contained by the actions of the bureaucracy, who understand the im-

portance of the relationship with Canada and work to keep it healthy, may not hold.

An additional problem is also developing as President Trump moves to eliminate senior individuals within the armed forces who disagree with his policies. In what is an unprecedented move, President Trump has fired four of senior officers and is expected to replace them with individuals who can be described as loyalists.²⁴ He has also fired the Judge Advocate for the Army, Navy and Air Force.²⁵ The list of fired admirals and generals are Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Charles Q. Brown; Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the chief of the Navy; Admiral Linda Fagan Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard and General James Slife, the Vice-Chief of the Air Force. The rationale that has been given by Secretary of Defense Hegseth is that these individuals have been prioritizing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies over the warrior ethos.²⁶ We have also witnessed seven prominent firings include three women (Pagan, Franchetti and Reynolds – Navy JAG) and two visible minorities (Brown and Reynolds). The Trump administration has made it clear that it strongly opposes any policies associated with DEI.²⁷ The firing of the female military leadership along with his ban against transgender Americans serving in the military²⁸ all suggest that his vision of what constitutes a proper military ethos is not inclusive.

The ramifications for the CAF are very troubling. Given the priority that exists within Canada for the promotion of DEI and given the efforts to redevelop the culture within the organization, what will it mean for anyone that the Americans interpret as being a product of DEI in the CAF? ²⁹ How will this impact the interactions of CAF personnel with their American counterparts? What will be the overall impact if President Trump is able to recreate American strategic culture within forces which will be at odds with the one Canada is actively trying to implement? Canadian Armed Forces do interact with members of other forces who do not share the Canadian commitment to the principle of DEI, but none of these interactions come near to the scope and depth of the Canada-U.S. defence relationship. It may be possible that the two forces will be able to operate without problems. But the possibility does exist for friction to develop and especially for those CAF personnel that no longer fit

the American definition of the “Warrior Ethos.”

Procurement

Canada’s tense relationship with the United States is contributing heartily to Canada’s already contentious procurement processes. First and most current is the growing concern already voiced by some observers that there is now an inherent danger of buying systems that are American designed and built.³⁰ This perspective is based on the assessment that, facing an increasingly unfriendly United States, the integration of American systems into developing capital projects such as the River Class destroyer will only serve to give them even greater control Canadian affairs and therefore needs to be avoided.

The challenge of this viewpoint, if it is correct, is in terms of the Canadian response. What are both the ability and costs that would now be associated with making such a decision to limit the purchase of American equipment? What would it require Canada to do? Furthermore, what is to be done in cases where the decision has been made, and contracts signed, as with the 88 Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II that Canada has agreed to buy?

On the one hand, by not cancelling these agreements, it might allow Canada to make the argument that it is a reliable ally and is trying to reach its commitment to spending 2% of its GDP on defence.³¹ On the other hand, given the nature of the technology, there is little question that this will require close cooperation between Ottawa and Washington to operate these aircraft even if relations continue to deteriorate.

There are two other problems that will also arise. In addition to the observations of individuals such as Vice Admiral (Ret’d) Mark Norman, there will likely be an increase in anti-Americanism as pressures mount. Already, at public events such as the recently concluded 4 Nations Faceoff hockey series, the American national anthem was booed, and the series was framed as a struggle between Canada and United States that transcended sport. Individual Canadians who advocate for cooperation with the Trump administration are being characterized in increasingly negative terms.³² If American actions continue to go against Canada, public sentiment will turn against any efforts to buy American—not only in terms of

defence, but in a broader sense as well. Thus, it will become increasingly difficult for any government to defend such decisions.

Conversely, the effort to avoid buying American will come at a cost. Given the fixation that the Trump administration has in protecting American companies, any attempt by the Canadian government will be seen as a hostile act. It does not matter that the only reason that Canada is doing this is because of initial American action against Canada. Indeed, all that will matter is that it will be cited as additional proof that Canada is not a trusted ally, and it will invite further negative actions by the American administration.

The other related cost will be felt in regard to the growing threat of Russia and China. Should either state initiate a conflict in which Canada is involved, there will be American weapon systems that would best serve Canadian defensive needs. This becomes especially clear in efforts to defend North America from hostile actors. For instance, American space-based systems are essential, and there are limited, if any, replacements. Besides, it is also inconceivable that Canada would buy non-American sensors and then be required to integrate them into the American system to protect the continent. Even though there could be a growing political and societal resistance to procuring American weapons and systems if relations continue to deteriorate, it is still not clear what the alternatives are.

Health Security

It has been reported that as of October 4, 2024 (when the reporting stopped), 60,871 people had died during the COVID-19 Pandemic, making it the deadliest pandemic in three generations.³³ The CAF was called upon to support Government efforts in several manners, including deployment to long-term care facilities in Quebec and Ontario, supporting northern and remote communities, assisting the Public Health Agency of Canada in managing and distributing personal protective equipment, and helping Public Health Ontario with contact-tracing efforts.³⁴ While the virus remains within the Canadian population, its effects have been controlled to the degree that very few of the measures enacted during the worst period of the outbreak remain. However, it is understood that another outbreak is possible as the virus remains among the

population and continues to evolve.³⁵

The Canadian response during the worst of the pandemic took place in an environment where the American government accepted the need to take all necessary means of responding to the spread of the virus and the development of vaccines to protect its population. There were some criticisms that the first Trump Administration disregarded early warnings, but it did eventually bring its full powers to addressing the crisis.³⁶ This was critical in responding to the outbreak given the geographic proximity of the two countries and the extensive connections that exist. Yet, looking ahead, the government will need to consider how to frame its response given that the current Administration is moving to dramatically alter its policies towards pandemic responses. In that sense, the appointment of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as Secretary of Health is significant in that he has been a very strong opponent of vaccination and very vocal in his opposition to most of the steps that both the Trump and Biden administrations took. Despite pledges not to revoke national vaccines measure at his senate hearing, he has not raised the possibility of altering vaccination policies for children and there have been significant cuts to staff at the CDC.³⁷

Any reduced American ability to vaccinate their population and pursue other means of control means that the impact on their population will be that much worse in the face of subsequent pandemic outbreaks. Studies have argued that for both Canada and the United States, any responses that are not immediate greatly increases the spread of any pandemic.³⁸ If the United States has reduced its ability to understand new pathogens by reducing the agencies that are assigned to this task, it will handicap their ability to respond in a timely fashion. This will be further exacerbated if there is no capacity to produce the necessary vaccinations and if the government has convinced a significant portion of its population that any such measures are ineffective or even harmful. Under such a scenario the spread of any new pathogen could be even greater than what occurred with COVID-19.

Another important challenge associated with that is that any Canadian response will be to deal with the inevitable misinformation that will emerge within any return of a pandemic as well as any disinformation deliberately released from anti-vaccination movements.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian officials found that there was a large quantity of misinformation and disinformation. Any new outbreak would undoubtedly see similar challenges.³⁹

One last issue that the Canadian Armed Forces along with other relevant agencies should also be prepared for is the possible development of a bio-weapon based on the weaponization of a pathogen. While there are challenges in developing such weapons, it remains a concern for WHO.⁴⁰ If these concerns are valid that this remains a possibility, it stands to reason that any adversary of the Americans would understand that the opportunity to attack successfully would be increased as the Americans take steps to reduce their ability to respond to the next pandemic. If they decrease their ability to understand the science of the pathogen caused by the elimination of key staff at agencies at the CDC. Additionally, the current American efforts to limit their ability to produce and distribute vaccines would further increase the odds of successfully spreading any such weapon. While Canada's response was generally seen as good relative to other countries,⁴¹ there was criticism of the Canada's overall response to the COVID -19 pandemic.⁴² What can Canada do to prepare and improve against such criticisms and in cooperation with a U.S. that is even less prepared?

American Nuclear Weapon Modernization

One aspect of American security policy that carries tremendous ramifications for Canadian security but receives very little public attention is the ongoing American effort to modernize their nuclear weapon deterrent forces and to advance their security deterrent policy. All three elements of the American legacy weapon systems—submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SSBNs), bombers, and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)—are in the process of being modernized and replaced. The Columbia class SSBN will replace the Ohio Class SSBN as the sea-based element of the American deterrent force.⁴³ The lead vessel, *District of Columbia* was laid down in June 2022 and is expected to enter service in 2030.⁴⁴ There will be twelve vessels built at an estimated construction cost of \$116.4 Billion.⁴⁵

The first test flight of the newest American bomber, the B-21 Raider, occurred on November 10, 2023.⁴⁶

At least one hundred aircraft are planned to be built at a cost believed to be about \$203 billion to replace the B-1, B-2 and eventually the B-52.⁴⁷

Finally, the LGM-35 Sentinel ICBM is now being developed to replace the current ICBM LGM-30G Minuteman III that are the current land-based element of the American deterrent force. The contract to develop these was awarded in 2020 and the first missile is expected to be ready for deployment in 2030. Costs are now estimated at \$125 billion.⁴⁸

The element of the American nuclear weapon modernization process that has created the most controversy was the decision taken during the first Trump administration to develop a sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) and a low-yield version of the W76 nuclear warhead for the Trident missile carried on board the Ohio (SLBM).⁴⁹ The argument was made that by having weapons that could be used in battle (tactical nuclear weapons), regional adversaries such as Iran and China would be deterred from using their weapons. The fear of critics is that such systems would increase the risk of using nuclear weapons thereby weakening the deterrent system.⁵⁰ While the Biden administration did not support the addition of these weapons, Congress kept the program from being cut. With the return of Trump to power, it is highly probable that it will now be strongly supported.

There are two key elements of the American efforts to modernize their nuclear deterrence forces that have a direct impact on Canada. First, the American deterrent system is predicated on receiving enough warning time regarding a missile attack, so that it has time to launch its missiles before the adversaries' missiles strike. The terrible logic of nuclear deterrence requires both sides to understand that they cannot succeed in a surprise attack, and, if they do attack, they will suffer the same fate as their target.⁵¹ Geography has always meant that any effort of the USSR to launch an attack by either bomber, land-based missile, and submarine, would result in the bombers and missiles flying over the Canadian Arctic. This is why the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) was formed and why the surveillance systems provided by the Distant Early Warning System (DEW Line) and subsequent North Warning systems were so critical for America to maintain its nuclear weapons deterrent posture.⁵² It is apparent that, even if

President Trump had not been re-elected, there would still be growing American pressure on Canada to ensure its surveillance systems could detect an incoming attack. Few Canadians pay attention to the modern issues surrounding nuclear deterrence, but the efforts taken by the Americans show the American population is very aware.

The second element is that the Trump administration is now investing efforts to replicate the Israeli Iron Dome. On January 27, 2025, Trump issued an executive order calling for the development of a missile defence system that will defend the American homeland against both peer and near-peer adversaries, including defence against ballistic, hypersonic, advanced cruise missiles, and other next-generation aerial attacks.⁵³ The executive order also calls for review of allied and theater defence. Such a system fits into his overall focus on the protection of American borders from all threats. However, this creates two significant challenges for Canada. First, such a review will show that Canada was the only NATO ally that did not agree to join the American ballistic weapon defence.⁵⁴ This decision was taken by the Martin government and never re-considered by either the Harper or the Justin Trudeau governments.⁵⁵ This will mean that when the review is completed and Canada's lack of participation is identified, there will be criticism coming from the Americans.

A second, and more fundamental, challenge for Canada will be if an American version of the Iron Dome is pursued and completed along with the extensive efforts to rebuild their deterrent forces. When Reagan proposed the Strategic Defence Initiative, which was a precursor to the Israeli Iron Dome, critics argued that it would undermine the nuclear deterrent system.⁵⁶ The Soviets feared that the combination of a successful anti-missile system in combination with the existing deterrent forces would place the Americans with a first-strike capability.⁵⁷ This meant that the United States could launch a massive nuclear strike against them and would then retain an ability to defend against any weaker retaliation by the USSR. While Reagan pledged that the United States would never consider such a possibility, it was obvious that the main elements of a successful nuclear deterrent system were threatened.

Canada will face tremendous pressure to join the

American Iron Dome if it is pursued. For an Iron Dome system to have the highest confidence of success, it needs to meet the various missile systems that pose a potential threat to it, far away from American border. Again, geography points to the Canadian Arctic as one of the key locations to both detect and respond to any form of incoming missile. The challenge for Canada will come when it is required to move beyond simply detecting the threat. Regardless of the feasibility, America will ask Canada to actively participate in missile defence, not just detection. If Canada says yes, it needs to be prepared to explain to a public that will be developing an ongoing dislike of America's actions. If Canada says no, it needs to be prepared for America's response. It is highly unlikely that the American response will be as tempered as when Martin turned down the request to join ballistic missile defence.

ARCTIC SECURITY

Redefining the Threat

The protection of Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security has always been an important symbolic issue for Canadian policy makers, but its real significance has waxed and waned over the years.⁵⁸ Crisis brought about by outside forces often focus the attention of Canadian leaders. Promises have often been made to protect the Canadian Arctic region, but many are never fulfilled or if they are, it is only in half-measures as the threat seems to recede. Yet, the real challenge is that the threats to the Arctic are both real and dangerous.

Russian Threat

Since the second phase of the Ukrainian war in February 2022, there has been a significant refocus on Arctic security by the Canadian Government. This has been brought about by two core elements: climate change and shifting geopolitical forces. Climate change is particularly pronounced in the Arctic regions, where warming temperatures are leading to an increased melting of the sea ice with the expectation that the Canadian Arctic in general will become more accessible.⁵⁹ It is thought this will lead to substantial increases in shipping and access to the resources of

the region. This potential increase in activity will bring with it safety, environmental protection, and legal challenges, all requiring a greater Canadian presence.

At the same time, the evolving international security environment discussed earlier has also increased concern about the military actions and intent of Russia and China in the region. There is a developing debate in Canada as to the nature of these threats.⁶⁰ There is no concern that either state is planning to “invade” the Canadian Arctic, but there is a growing concern about the aerospace and maritime threats.⁶¹ There are two concerns about Russia that are interrelated. The first is the growing military capabilities that Russia is building in its Arctic region. Indeed, the Russians have been active in rebuilding and modernizing their northern military bases from the Cold War era.⁶² The second concern is with the development of the new hypersonic missile technology that can be armed with nuclear weapons.⁶³

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the reaction of the Canadian Government was muted. The Harper Government did move to bring some sanctions.⁶⁴ At that point in time, Canada held the chair of the Arctic Council. Canadian officials would not attend meeting that were to be held in Russia. When the Trudeau government came to power it attempted to re-engage with Russia in the Arctic.⁶⁵ It termed Russia’s actions as an illegal occupation, but took steps to keep its response to this action separate from its efforts to cooperate with the Russians in the Arctic through the Arctic Council.⁶⁶

Following the second phase of the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the Canadian position on the Russian threat has hardened. Both statements by senior officials and the ones present in official documents such as the recently released DPU and *Arctic Foreign Policy* make it clear that Russia is now a threat to Canada in the region. Indeed, Arctic security has emerged as one of the most important and pressing issues for the Canadian defence community. As stated in the DPU:

The most urgent and important task we face is asserting Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic and northern regions, where the changing physical and geopolitical landscapes have created new threats

and vulnerabilities to Canada and Canadians.⁶⁷

As for the newly released *Arctic Foreign Policy*, it explains this in the following terms:

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape, with spillover effects in the Arctic. It is an attack not only against Ukraine, but also on the fundamental principles of international relations, including respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and international law.⁶⁸

It goes on to state:

While the risk of military attack in the North American Arctic remains low, the region represents a geographic vector for traditional and emerging weapons systems that threaten broader North American and Transatlantic security. Canada is seeing a number of potential threats, including increased Russian activity in Canadian air approaches, China’s regular deployment of dual-use—having both research and military application—research vessels and surveillance platforms to collect data, and a general increase in Arctic maritime activity.⁶⁹

This represents a significant shift in the position of Canada regarding the threat posed by Russia. It also raised the importance of Arctic security to one of the most important defence and foreign policy issues for Canada. The focus on what then is to be done to meet this threat is centered on efforts to modernize NORAD capabilities, which is covered in the next section.

China Threat

The Canadian position regarding China has also evolved. Originally, Canadian policy was to welcome Chinese efforts to become engaged in the Arctic. However, several recent events have led the Canadian government to change this position and to see China as a growing threat to Canada in the Arctic. For example, former Minister of National Defence Anita Arand testified in 2023 that:

Last month the North American Aerospace Defence Command—NORAD—detected, identified and tracked a high-altitude surveillance balloon from the People’s Republic of China, along with

three subsequent objects over North America. Fighter aircraft took down the four unauthorized airborne objects in Canadian and American airspace.⁷⁰

Current Minister of National Defence Bill Blair also noted how China is both increasing its presence in the region and is also developing weapons systems like the Russians that could threaten Canada in its northern regions:

Russia and China see the Arctic as a key to expanding their influence, and they have shown a willingness to work together. Most states are investing in new and emerging military technology, like long-range cruise missiles, modern submarines and hypersonic weapons that move faster and are harder to detect.

Last year, as many of you will recall, a Chinese surveillance balloon violated our sovereignty and we've been seeing a growing number of Chinese dual purpose research vessels and surveillance platforms incurred into our region. Any unauthorized entry into our airspace is deeply troubling. Such actions underscore the evolving threats Canada faces here at home in a world defined by strategic competition and uncertainty.⁷¹

Overall, the assessment is that the Chinese threat remains nebulous but is growing. Indeed, China is increasing its military and quasi-military presence in the region and is developing weapon systems that could threaten Canada. Its growing military and economic cooperation with Russia in the region are also causing concerns. There are three predominant concerns regarding China in the Arctic.

The first pertains to the Chinese efforts to establish an economic foothold in the region and especially to gain control over the mining of critical minerals. While recent attempts to buy a gold mine were rebuffed,⁷² there remains concerns about their ongoing efforts to gain access to commercial parties involved in the mining industry.⁷³

The second is the development of the means to disrupt future Canadian Arctic cables. As evidenced by the increased attacks on cables in the waters of northern Europe, this is becoming a means of attack under conditions less than war. Canada does not yet

have any cables in its northern waters but there are a growing number of projects that will soon be developed. As outlined by Alexander Dalziel, an expert on Arctic Security, there are a growing number of threats from Russia that Canada will need to consider.⁷⁴ Besides, Ottawa also needs to consider that China is now building a third icebreaker that will be capable of operating deep-diving submersibles. While it is too soon to know with any certainty, it is possible that such a capability would also give it the means of cutting or interfering with undersea cables in the Arctic.⁷⁵

The third maritime threat that may emerge is the development of Chinese nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) or guided-missile submarines (SS-GNs) that could have an under-ice capability. It is crucial to remind ourselves that the Chinese have one of the most advanced and significant ship-building capabilities in the world. While Dr. Adam Lajeunesse and Dr. Tim Choi, maritime security experts, have both concluded that even though it is the Chinese could take the necessary steps to build these capabilities into their newest submarines, they remain unconvinced that it would be worth their while.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most logical reason would be to keep the Americans unbalanced. Even if the Chinese were to show up very sporadically, the Americans would be required to dedicate significant resources to remain vigilant, and particularly in the event of increasing tensions between the two countries. Should the Chinese make the decision to proceed, this would add further pressures for Canada to build the capabilities to detect and respond. This means sensors in the western arctic as well as submarines with some under-ice capability.

NORAD

The most visible effort made by the Canadian government to improve its defence relationship with the United States has been through modernizing NORAD. It is also the most important element of defending the North American Arctic and to meet the Russian and Chinese threats. Yet, as American pressure mounts on Canada through the policies, statements and actions of the Trump administration, NORAD modernization will undoubtedly be used as a means of demonstrating Canada's willingness to increase its defence expenditures while showing Canada's importance to American security.

The intent to proceed with NORAD modernization was first noted in the defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) in 2017. It was then repeated in several major announcements in 2022 and then restated in both the DPU and the *Arctic Foreign Policy*, both released in 2024. The most important element of modernization is in response to the growing geopolitical military threats posed by Russia, and increasingly, by China. The threat is manifested through the improvements in nuclear-armed missile technology, which has been increasingly identified as a risk to North America.

Efforts to modernize are seen as one of the most important ways in which Canada can meet its 2% GDP defence spending requirements. However, the challenge has been that the modernization processes have taken time to advance. Efforts have been accelerating since February 2022, with new infrastructure and capabilities meant to develop over-the-horizon radars and a host of new sensors. Where less progress seems to have occurred is regarding advancing planning on dealing with the Arctic maritime threats. This is a complex issue that has not received much attention. There is little information available as to the CAF's ability to protect underwater cables in Arctic waters or to deal with the detection of the submarine threat. Perhaps in recognition of this gap in communication, the Canadian Government has recently employed more positive language concerning the acquisition of new submarines to replace the Victoria class. However, it is recognized that it will take Canada an extended period to be able to deploy any new submarines. The first submarine is not expected until 2037 and there is little information that is known regarding its ability to operate in Arctic waters.

Perhaps one of the most important political challenges to face Canada is the shifting relationship between Russia and the United States. The urgency to modernize NORAD was the direct result of the actions taken by Putin in his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As Deputy Prime Minister Freeland stated in Parliament at the time, "the world we woke up to on February 24 was different from the one that had existed when we turned off the lights the night before." She then went on to clearly identify Russia as a direct threat to Canada and North America. This is repeated in both the DPU and the *Arctic Foreign*

Policy. Successive American documentation has also identified Russia and China as the major threats to North America, with Russia specifically targeted for the dangers that it poses to the North.

However, this assessment of Russia as a threat is now being challenged by President Trump. There have always been concerns about the efforts of Russia to influence the 2016 election in favor of Trump. These concerns grew when President Trump refused to accept his own agency's assessment of the Russian threat in favor of what Putin told him in Helsinki.⁷⁷ However, the recent statements by Trump and other members of his administration point to an even greater pivot on the American analysis of the nature of the Russian threat. For instance, President Trump rejected the American position that the Russians started the war in Ukraine. Instead, he has publicly stated that it was Ukraine who started the war. He has also initiated negotiations to end the war directly with Russia, very publicly excluding any Ukrainian participation. While this may be associated with his pledge to end the war in one day, there are signs that Trump is also moving to reestablish business relations with Russia. This all indicates that President Trump is, in effect, transforming American threat perceptions of Russia. If that is the case, what does this mean for the assessments made by Canada regarding Russia? If the reports are correct that Secretary of State Rubio is meeting with his Russian counterpart to discuss the lifting of diplomatic restrictions and the return of business relations, then questions will develop about the nature of Canadian threat perceptions of Russia.

Managing the political relationship with the Americans will remain a critical element of Canadian efforts regarding the modernization of NORAD. Canadian officials will need to work with their American counterparts in a political environment that will continue to challenge and change the bilateral relationship. In the best-case scenario, relations will stabilize as the Trump Administration moves onto different elements of its political agenda. However, it also remains possible that the political disagreements will continue to grow between Canada and the United States and that it will complicate the efforts to work with Americans and using primary American-produced systems. The ultimate challenge will be taking the necessary steps – which will be very costly to both ensure the

ability to meet Russian and Chinese threats while also demonstrating to the Americans that Canadian actions are essential to the defence of North America and protection of Canadian Arctic Sovereignty.

One of the greatest policy challenges inherent in addressing the protection of Canadian Arctic sovereignty is the conflation of two key terms – ‘Arctic sovereignty’ and ‘Arctic security’. Both the DPU and the *Arctic Foreign Policy* use the terms interchangeably. Yet, they are different terms and require different policy actions to safeguard the Canadian Arctic. The protection of Arctic sovereignty is the narrower of the two but is often used as a reference to include Arctic security. The protection of Arctic sovereignty is an international law problem, and it deals with the determination and protection of the boundaries defining the Canadian Arctic. With the recent resolution of the Hans Island dispute,⁷⁸ there is little disagreement around Canadian claims of land sovereignty. Indeed, it is maritime boundaries where there remain challenges.

The most important Arctic sovereignty issue that remains is the international status of the Canadian Northwest Passage.⁷⁹ The Canadian position is that the Passageway is within internal waters based on historical usage. Canada also argues that the land, sea, and ice have been used by the Inuit since time immemorial.⁸⁰ In effect, Canada has exercised exclusive control over the Northwest Passage and therefore has the right to exclusive control over domestic and international navigation within it. The most vocal opposition to this position is offered by the United States. The American position is that the Northwest Passage is an international strait.⁸¹ There have only been two vessels that have made passage without the permission of Canada—both American—the SS *Manhattan* in 1969 and USCG *Polar Sea* in 1985. There have been a series of efforts to resolve this issue. In 1988, the Arctic Cooperation Agreement⁸² was reached in which the United States agreed to ask for Canadian consent when they wished to send a Coast Guard icebreaker through the Passage and Canadians agreed to always give consent when asked.⁸³ The agreement stipulated that it did not affect the respective positions of the two states.⁸⁴

The United States has based its position on the concern of setting a precedent internationally rather than any focused attention on the Northwest Passage. Indeed, this is made clear in any examination of the

negotiations of the 1988 Arctic Cooperation Agreement.⁸⁵ Apart from what had been a good relationship, the Americans knew that any agreement that gave Canada control over the Northwest Passage would incline other countries that also bordered international straits to request the same agreement. However, if the Northwest Passage was determined to be an international strait, then all nations could exercise the right of transit passage. This means that as long as the vessels are abiding by all international laws and standards, they are allowed to transit the waterway without the permission of the coastal state. Under international law, this logic applies to warships and aircraft as well. Besides, transit passage also establishes that all vessels can navigate the waterway in their normal mode of operation. This means, for instance, that submarines do not have to surface. During the Cold War, the United States did not have to give the Soviet Navy the international right to sail through the Northwest Passage nor have their bombers and other aircraft fly over it. Thus, from the period of the first crisis to now, Canada and the United States have been able to manage the dispute.

However, in the first term of the Trump presidency there were signs that the Americans were revisiting their long-term willingness to work with Canada regarding this dispute. Both the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of State made a statement which strongly and publicly challenged the Canadian position.⁸⁶ The Americans stopped short of sending a vessel through the Northwest Passage without Canadian consent, neglecting the previously discussed agreement. But given the current actions seen in Trump’s second term, it is necessary to consider the possibility that he will instruct the U.S. Coast Guard to deploy a vessel on what would be considered a Freedom of Navigation (FON) voyage where the Americans deliberately deploy to support their international legal position and ignore their agreement with Canada.⁸⁷

Such an action on the part of the Americans would be both contradictory and counter to their efforts to secure their borders to enemy threats. If the Americans successfully push their claim, the very weapon systems that General VanHerck, former USNORTHCOM and NORAD commander, warned would be difficult to defend against are then able to legally get much closer to the U.S. by sailing through the Northwest

Passage. But given all the counterproductive steps Trump has already taken against Canada; this cannot be ruled out.

CANADA and the INDO-PACIFIC REGION

Most of the key issues have already been touched upon in the sections above as they pertain to the future of Canadian security relations in the Indo-Pacific region. The key issue that still needs to be considered is in regard to friends and adversaries in the region.

Friends and Adversaries

There are now several forces at play that threaten to upend much of Canada's traditional policies and actions in the region. As outlined in Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy,⁸⁸ and the DPU,⁸⁹ both point out that Canadian security is based on a peaceful rules-based system. Both documents also focus on the economic strength of the region and how important it is for Canada. However, both documents also provide a clear understanding of the challenge that China plays both in the region and globally. As stated in *Our North, Strong and Free*:

China is an increasingly capable and assertive global actor looking to reshape the international system to advance its interests and values, which increasingly diverge from our own on matters of defence and security. It is seeking to establish exclusive control of international waterways and airspace in the region, openly aspires to unify with Taiwan, by force if necessary, and is using force or coercion to incrementally expand its influence from the East and South China Seas to the Himalayas.⁹⁰

The recent Hogue Report also underlines the efforts that China is putting into the spread of misinformation in Canada, and NSICOP recently suggested that China has placed undue influence on to Canada's elected officials. The issues surrounding the "two Michaels"⁹¹ as well as the surveillance balloons sent across North America are indications of the security challenges that China is now creating for Canada.

Yet, it has been assumed that Canada would be

able to face any military challenge that China may pose through Canada's close cooperation with the United States. However, this assumption is now under fire. It has been pointed out that President Trump is only trying to rattle Canada by acting in a belligerent fashion and that once he has accomplished these objectives— including in the Indo-Pacific region, it will all return to normal. The problem with such a hope is that any return to normal is disrupted by Trump's policy regarding China.

Much of his rhetoric paints China as America's most dangerous enemy in both economic and military terms.⁹² America has responded with threats of ruinous tariffs but what is confounding for Canada is that Canada and Mexico are included in the tariffs. Thus, not only is it not clear if Canada can still count on American support, but Canada is seemingly viewed as equal an adversary to the United States as China when it comes to trade issues— as Canada has been subject to blanket tariffs to compensate for the trade deficit between the two nations—a rationale often put forth by both President Trump and those in his administration.

It also remains uncertain what military actions may occur between the U.S. and China – if any. In keeping with President Trump's efforts to upend his relations with America's longest-term allies and friends, he has attacked Taiwan's semiconductor industry.⁹³ In addition, the U.S. State Department has removed a highly symbolic phrase from its routine update on Taiwan which used to say, "We do not support Taiwan independence."⁹⁴ So, is Trump signaling to China that Trump's America will provide more support to Taiwan or is this all to show the Taiwanese that they must also give in to his demands? The question appears as to whether there is a greater chance of the U.S. military opposing China in the region if the Chinese choose to invade Taiwan. Ultimately, should war occur, what would the U.S. expect Canada to do; what would it do?

The other new reality for Canada and its foreign relations is that some regional states are becoming more adversarial. Within the Hogue Report, there are three identified Asian states that are directing misinformation campaigns against Canada – China, India, and Pakistan. The publicly redacted version of the NSICOP report does not name states, but some reports suggest that there are Indo-Pacific states beyond China

that are trying to influence Canadian political leaders. For instance, the relationship between India and Canada remains difficult. Trudeau very publicly accused the Indian Government of arranging the killing of a Canadian national on Canadian soil who the Indian Government has accused of being a terrorist.⁹⁵

Relations with nations that are normally friendly to Canada have also faced challenges. The Canadian Government refused Japan's request for natural gas in 2023 to provide an alternative to Russian supplies.⁹⁶ Likewise, it remains uncertain if Canada was deliberately excluded when Australia, UK and the U.S. formed the AUKUS security partnership. There have been some concerns that Canada was not seen as being a serious partner regarding security issues.⁹⁷

Taken in its entirety these are troubling trends for Canada in the region. Indeed, an uncertain future in regard to its traditional cooperation with the Americans in the region, adversarial states that are directly attempting to undermine Canada politics; and friends, that do not seem too friendly at the current time, all raise concerns. The challenge in all of this for Canada is that in a time of growing uncertainty and even possible threat from the United States, and a growing security threat posed by China, there is a need to improve and build relations with other like-minded states. The problem is that Canada, because of its limited defence budget, has little that it can offer to other states invested in security. As such, this problem will get worse rather than better, at least until defence capabilities improve. However, even if Canada does improve its defence spending, the focus will be on the Canadian Arctic and continental defence, leaving other international security demands unmet. As such, the problem of good relations with the United States in an increasingly dangerous time will remain worrisome.

STRATEGIC OUTLOOK: PROCUREMENT

Dr. Philippe Lagassé Carleton University

Canada has been undertaking a slow but steady recapitalization of the CAF since 2017. Although a narrative of procurement failures continues to permeate

the public debate about military acquisitions, there are reasons to be cautiously hopeful. The ongoing recapitalization will not deliver all the capabilities the CAF needs, nor should we expect the government to overcome the delays plaguing the procurement system. Yet the CAF will be better equipped and more capable by the end of this decade than it has in a generation. Defence procurement reforms at the bureaucratic level also appear likely in the coming years. There is a growing recognition that existing procurement processes cannot keep pace with technological change. As a result, new ways of acquiring defence capabilities are needed, notably when it comes to information technology and digitization. Central agencies will likely resist reforms that increase risks, but a determined government should be able to overcome their concerns. Absent political will, however, Canadian defence procurement may continue to suffer an unduly laborious weapons acquisition system, one that it not suited to the pace of global and technological change.

Canada's slow but steady recapitalization of the CAF has inched toward meaningful procurement reform, however, there may soon be secondary issues. A looming trade war with the United States, and a possible weakening of American alliances, including NATO and NORAD, threatens to upend Canada's approach to national defence. A trade war with the United States could compel the Canadian government to re-evaluate military acquisition projects with American equipment manufacturers. In addition, it is unclear that the government will press ahead with plans to increase defence spending to 2% of the Gross Domestic Product if large federal outlays are required to stave off job losses and a prolonged recession. Simply put, trade tensions between Canada and the United States make it increasingly difficult to predict how defence procurement will unfold in the coming year and beyond.

Canadian defence procurement since 2017

The Liberal government's 2017 defence policy SSE provided policy direction and funding commitments for a large-scale recapitalization of the CAF. Included among the SSE's initiatives were plans to replace most of the military's major fleets, such as Canada's fighter and refuelling aircraft, land vehicles, and space assets. SSE also accounted for the acquisition

of new capabilities, such as remotely piloted aircraft systems. All told, SSE involved over \$160 billion in capital spending commitments over approximately 20 years.⁹⁸

When it was released, SSE was silent about a major part of the Canadian defence the modernization of the NORAD. The Liberal government addressed this so-called ‘missing chapter’ of SSE in 2022. As part of the NORAD modernization agreement with the United States, Ottawa committed to spending \$38.6 billion more on capital investments in the coming decades.⁹⁹

Still, more investments were announced in the Liberal government’s long-awaited 2024 DPU. As part of the defence policy update, the government pledged to spend an additional \$73 billion over 20 years, a good portion of which was meant to deal with gaps and delays associated with SSE. The DPU also outlined several ‘exploratory’ capabilities, such as airborne early warning and a submarine replacement. Faced with significant allied pressure to increase its defence spending, the Liberal government announced that it would move ahead with the Canadian Patrol Submarine Project (CPSP) during the 2024 NATO summit. A request for information for CPSP was subsequently released to industry in the fall.

As David Perry, a defence procurement expert, has documented, the recapitalization of the CAF has been slower than promised. The Department of National Defence (DND) has continued to lapse spending, and the government has not contracted for new capabilities as rapidly as hoped.¹⁰⁰ This is not surprising. The recapitalization that began in 2017 came after years of delayed procurements. Not only was DND not used to moving and managing many large programs and projects, but it also lacked the staff needed to do so. The wider government faced similar issues, and central agencies, notably the Treasury Board Secretariat, remained inherently risk averse.

Despite these predictable delays and spending lapses, however, the recapitalization of the CAF has been moving forward. Several high-profile programs and acquisitions have been contracted since 2017, including:

- CF-18 life extension;
- Future fighter capability project (88 F-35s);

- Remotely piloted aircraft system project (Q9 Predator drones);
- Strategic Tanker Transport Capability project (six CC-330 Huskies);
- Canadian Multi-Mission Aircraft (16 P-8 aircraft);
- Manned airborne intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance project;
- Logistics Vehicle Modernization project;
- NORAD Cloud-Based Command and Control;

In addition, the government has moved forward on shipbuilding projects that were announced by the previous Conservative government. The Arctic Offshore Patrol Ship fleet is nearing completion, and as discussed below, construction on the Canadian Surface Combatant will begin apace this year.

In sum, notwithstanding the negativity and gloom surrounding most Canadian defence procurement analyses, the government has made progress. Many of the projects announced since 2017 have been significantly delayed. Still more have had to reduce their scope owing to insufficient funds. Many projects that should have been underway by now remain stubbornly stuck. But there are an equal number of success stories and reasons for hope. The CAF is being recapitalized, slowly but surely.

Anticipated procurement milestones for 2025-2026

Several defence procurement projects are expected to reach notable milestones in 2025-2026.¹⁰¹ As outlined in the *2024-2025 Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Departmental Plan*, the project milestone includes:

- The Armoured Combat Support Vehicle (ACSV), which includes command vehicles, ambulances, and other support systems achieved initial operational capability (IOC) in 2024. ACSV is expected to reach full operational capability (FOC) in 2026.

Following a decade of requirements refinement and design work between 2012 and 2022, construction on the Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) is underway. It is expected that the first CSC will be delivered be-

tween 2030-2033. This longer schedule is in keeping with a first in class build. Subsequent production should be faster, though the initial ships will inevitably experience challenges and shortfalls. Coupled with rising costs associated with the program, the CSC may experience greater scrutiny once the first ships are delivered to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN).

- The Fixed-Wing Search and Rescue Aircraft (FWSAR) will achieve IOC in 2025-2026. This project will delivery 16 CC-295 Kingfisher aircraft to replace the CC-115 Buffalo and CC-130H Hercules aircraft. FOC is expected to be achieved in 2029-2030.
- FFCP will deliver a first F-35 fighter aircraft to Canada in 2026. ICO for the Canadian CF-35 fleet is expected in 2029-2030. This timeline will allow for the preparation of new infrastructures, facilities, and training for the Canadian F-35s. As well, weapons for the new fighters will be acquired.
- Canada is expected to receive the first of two Joint Support Ships in 2025-2026. These ships will replace the interim naval refuelling capability provided by the Asterix. The second JSS is expected to be delivered in 2027, allowing the fleet to achieve FOC in 2028.
- The Canadian Army's Coyote armoured vehicle fleet is being replaced as part of the Light Armoured Reconnaissance Surveillance System (LRSS) project. Under LRSS, the Army will acquire a fleet of 66 light armoured vehicles (LAV) 6.0 that are specialized for surveillance roles. LRSS should achieve FOC in 2025.
- Progress has been made on the Victoria Class Modernization (VCM) project, notably for the modernization of the submarines' flank array and periscope. Work is continuing on other components of the modernization, including the air monitoring system, quieting, and data fusion. The four submarines are undergoing habitability improvements as well.

Updates to the Victoria-class submarines are needed to ensure that the RCN retains a submarine capability

in anticipation of the CPSP. Under the CPSP's aggressive timeline, the RCN is hoping to award a contract for up to 12 new diesel electric submarines by 2028. The aim is to ensure the delivery of the first boat by 2035, when the Victoria-class will begin the last phases of their extended service lives. This timeline will only be achievable if the RCN accepts a design that is already in service or under construction. A developmental or conceptual design would likely introduce significant delays. Indeed, even an off-the shelf design may have difficulty being delivered by 2035, unless a supplier provides Canada with preferential access to a production like Germany has done. To further address schedule risks, the RCN appears committed to accepting an existing design with minimal modifications. This may mean that the RCN will have to adapt to novel combat system and perhaps a new torpedo.

CPSP should be watched closely over the coming years. DND and the RCN will have to overcome resistance to their aggressive timeline and more flexible approach to requirements. The 2025 election may also delay things or introduce other unknowns around the submarine acquisition. At this stage, however, it appears that CPSP may be able to achieve its ambitious schedule, provided that the project does not encounter too many political and bureaucratic obstacles.

Alongside existing specific projects and programs, Canada's defence procurement landscape will be shaped by an ongoing reform effort. Housed within Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC), the defence procurement review has been underway for a few years. It should recommend changes to Canada's procurement structures and processes as they relate to defence. The PSPC team has identified various ways to streamline and tailor procurement processes to allow the government to acquire military capabilities and services more quickly. Given that there is widespread political support for accelerating military procurement and simplifying procedures, the defence procurement review work should be taken up by whichever party is in power. Yet it remains unclear when the review will be complete, how wide ranging its reforms will be, and whether other actors within the bureaucracy will be prepared to embrace meaningful procurement reform. As we will now discuss, developments in the United States may no longer make these reforms optional.

Trump 2.0 and 2% of GDP

No discussion of Canada's procurement outlook would be complete without acknowledging the uncertainty surrounding the Canada-U.S. relationship and Canada's plans to accelerate its plans to spend 2% of GDP on defence. It is difficult to predict how these factors will affect Canadian defence procurement, though we can envisage two possible scenarios.

The first scenario sees the Canadian government committing to spend 2% of GDP or more on defence to reassure the Trump administration that Canada is a reliable ally and perhaps convince the President to abandon his promised tariffs on Canada. As defence minister Blair has intimated, there are plans in place to reach the 2% target before the 2032 date announced at last year's NATO summit.¹⁰² It is likely that this accelerated approach would involve a combination of spending on personnel, infrastructure, operations, and new capabilities. Since plans to augment the defence budget to 2% of GDP have been in place since Anita Anand's tenure as Minister of National Defence (2021-2023), they are unlikely to be scattershot or lacking in detail. The chief obstacles will be resistance from Cabinet and the Department of Finance, as well as capacity issues tied to Treasury Board slots and delays that will accompany a general election.

Defence Minister Blair has also indicated that this could involve additional procurements under the American foreign military sales (FMS) program. This might be presented to the Trump administration as evidence that Canada is committed to buying more from the United States, considering the President's insistence that foreign states should invest more in the American economy and seek to balance their trade. Indeed, Ottawa could leverage future and existing defence procurement contracts to highlight Canada's standing as a consumer of American goods and services. For instance, Canada could increase the number of F-35s and Predators it plans to acquire. This would signal a willingness to buy American and help Canada reach the 2% target, while demonstrating its commitment to North American defence cooperation.

The second scenario would be less positive for defence and the armed forces. If Ottawa responds to the American tariffs by implementing a large-scale workers and business support program, there may not be

enough money to increase defence spending any time soon. Simply put, the tariff relief package could swallow any fiscal room that might exist to augment military expenditures. As importantly under this scenario, Ottawa's willingness to expand existing contracts with American firms or buy new capabilities from the United States would likely be curtailed as part of a trade war between the two countries. It would be politically difficult to tell Canadians that Ottawa is imposing retaliatory measures on the United States while simultaneously buying billions of dollars in American-made platforms or services. On the contrary, the politically attractive course of action would be to emphasize suppliers in Canada, Europe, or Asia. Refusing to acquire more American capabilities than necessary could become a point of principle. Since there would also be limited funds, this could be a pretext for not spending more on the armed forces.

These two scenarios are far from exhaustive. There are many other ways that the evolution of the Canada-U.S. relationship could affect defence procurement in the coming years. Currently, DND and the CAF appear to be working under the assumption that nothing has fundamentally changed, aside from an increased urgency to reach the 2% target. Yet the foundations of the Canada-U.S. relationship, and of the United States' perceptions of NATO, have shifted so much that it is increasingly hard to write with confidence about what lies ahead for Canadian defence.

Indeed, as Canadians watch monumental shifts in American and global politics unfold at a rapid pace, the challenges associated with defence procurement appear relatively small by comparison. For now, the Canadian government is progressing with the recapitalization that began in 2017. This recapitalization is likely to continue regardless of which party carries the 2025 election. It seems increasingly likely, however, that this recapitalization will carry on at a time when the fundamentals of Canadian defence are being reconsidered.

CONCLUSION

It is possible that 2025 may be regarded by future generation as one of the most transformational periods for Canadian security. There are two massive shifts that are driving these changes. First, the bedrock of

Canadian defence – the Canada-U.S. relationship - is being challenged in ways that were deemed to be unimaginable just months ago. The idea that the first course of action for an American President would be to openly talk about the annexation of Canada as the 51st state seemed unthinkable. Yet President Trump is persisting in developing this narrative. While the “hope” that President Trump is only uttering such words to ensure that Canadian leaders give him favorable terms on all his requests for Canada remains, his actions elsewhere seem to indicate that this needs to be taken seriously. This challenge to the long-standing relationship will affect all elements of Canadian defence and security policy. It might be possible to work with the Americans on a business-as-usual approach on some issues, but it is not certain at this point how this can be done. There are already calls from some former military leaders that it is now too late to be able to do this.

As Canada is dealing with the mercurial nature of the United States, it must also deal with a growing number of adversarial states. Canada is caught in the crosshairs of some states that simply want to attack the rules-based international order at a time of chaos and vulnerability. Others are specifically targeting Canada and are becoming increasingly disruptive. Canada has for a long time thought that it enjoyed positive relations with most members of the international system and that it had much to offer as an example to be emulated - “the world needs more Canada” (Obama).¹⁰³

What makes this even more dangerous for Canada is the growing advancements of weapons systems and the means of attacking with actions short of war. From the new dangers posed by social media, cyber-warfare, to new hypersonic missiles, the threats are developing across a bewildering spectrum of capabilities. Perhaps most frightening are some initial signs that the fundamentals of the system of nuclear deterrence may be challenged. While no one is suggesting that nuclear war is imminent, considerations of how to defend – not deter – a nuclear attack are growing. This points to a possible shift to think of the unthinkable, where consideration will be given to fighting a nuclear war rather than deterring a nuclear war. In addition, given the perilous nature of the international system, there are undoubtedly those who will seek to wea-

ponize the already terrible pathogens that so badly damaged western society. Thus, Canada is no longer protected by its geography, and it may no longer be protected by its best friend.

Where does this leave Canadian security going into the future? Obviously, it needs to ensure that it makes good on its promises to increase defence expenditures. Many of the plans that have been developed are excellent plans and if implemented will improve Canadian security. But for this to happen there needs to be two key actions.

First, Canada’s political elites must find the political will to ensure that Canada is protected as well as can be managed. Defence is not something that most Canadian political elites wish to focus on. Yet there must be a transformative change in the “normal” thinking within the political leadership.

Finally, the transformative nature of this new political will must be informed by strategic thinking analysis. It is no longer acceptable to depend on our more powerful allies and friends to be the ones that access the world around us, which allowed us to only have to worry about how Canada was going to help them fulfill the plan. It is becoming an increasingly dangerous and chaotic world and Canada needs to be able to protect itself.

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