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TAKE A LONG-TERM VIEW OF NATIONAL DEFENCE: Advice for Canada's Political Parties

BY CHARLES DAVIES

Introduction

Political parties put much effort into crafting credible, realistic election platforms encompassing a very diverse range of complex issues. Particular care needs to be taken when it comes to the planks related to defence and security, which are not only politically, operationally and legislatively complex but also characterized by uncertainty about future events and what national responses may be necessary. A comprehensive discussion of the subject could easily consume several large volumes, so this article focuses on a high-level examination of the specific area of defence.

Defence policy is not about the missions the government of the day assigns to the Canadian Armed Forces at a point in time – these are matters of foreign and national security policy. Defence policy has a future focus and needs to be grounded in a rational assessment of the global security environment and the threats likely to be faced by the nation now and in the future. Based on that assessment, it defines what defence capabilities the nation intends to acquire, maintain, or divest, and aligns these ends with the necessary ways and means.

Defence capability investments have time horizons reaching years or decades into the future. It is rare for a new government to be able to decide upon a major capability acquisition or upgrade and have it fully implemented during a single mandate.¹ More commonly, it will be one, two, or more elections later that the capability will be available for use, so decisions taken years ago largely define the military options available to governments

today, and decisions taken today will similarly define the options available to future governments.

This means that a new government will not “own” Canada’s defence policy during its time in office the way it will, say, foreign policy. Rather, it will exercise stewardship of the policy during its mandate, and parties are consequently well-advised to take a very thoughtful and measured approach to the defence planks of their platforms, and any commitments they may make during the campaign. The clear lesson of history is that ill-considered election commitments on defence can do more harm than good to both the party and the nation. The short-term political benefits sought may or may not be obtained, and there can be unintended, long-term consequences that dog a party for years afterwards, if it forms the government, whether it reneges on the commitment when the realities are comprehended or keeps to the commitment regardless of the cost to the nation.

This article offers non-partisan advice on how parties can avoid these kinds of pitfalls by taking a deliberate, carefully reasoned approach to their thinking about the nation’s defence policies and capabilities.

Context

To briefly establish some context to help explain the complexities of National Defence, the institution is structured around the execution of four core processes:

- Provision of strategic defence policy and military advice to government;
- Force development – that is, the conceptualization and building of the future force and its constituent capabilities;
- Force generation and regeneration of the current force; and
- Force employment, or the conduct of assigned missions.²

Of these processes, force generation and regeneration represents the largest and most complex business area, and is the foundation upon which success in force employment will always rest.

To be successful, military missions require orchestrated action by multiple Canadian Armed Forces capabilities, often with those of allies or partners. Increasingly, military capabilities are integrated with non-defence efforts such as diplomatic initiatives, develop-

ment aid, and other capacity-building activities; and in certain missions the military plays a secondary role in support of another lead department such as the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development.

Defence capabilities can be lethal or non-lethal and cover a broad spectrum of tasks such as command and control, air defence, sea control, battlefield reconnaissance, and intelligence gathering and analysis, among many others. All defence capabilities comprise varying mixes of four main elements:

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- *Personnel* (primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, military personnel), including their recruitment, training, organization, management, and care;
- Major defence *equipment* such as ships and aircraft as well as other equipment, information systems, supplies, and services needed to conduct operations and train to be ready for those operations;
- Essential defence *infrastructure* needed for operations, readiness, and training such as dockyards, airfields, and training facilities; and
- Military *doctrine* and the professional body of military knowledge required to knit the other elements together into effective force elements; plan and command assigned operations; adapt quickly to changes in operational, technological, geopolitical or other conditions; and sustain the nation’s defence institution over the long term.³

The four elements have to be present in an appropriate balance, and be well integrated and readied, before a defence capability can be considered operationally effective. Understanding this distinction between having elements of a capability and having ready forces able to conduct assigned missions is very important if a party is to credibly claim an ability, when in government, to effectively manage its important responsibilities for National Defence.

Two Key Considerations for Parties and Their Leadership

1. The Stewardship Role

The defence planks of party platforms should be aimed at establishing credibility as a sound steward of Canada’s defence policy. This requires that the ideas put forward be developed with a long-term view of the nation’s defence needs, be based on a well-reasoned

analysis of the present and likely future global security situation future governments can be expected to face,⁴ and reflect a good understanding of Canadian values and interests.

A realistic perspective of Canadian interests is particularly important. While clearly grounded in Canadian values, the national interest will often require pragmatic decisions that go beyond a narrow view of those values. This is necessary if Canada is to both safeguard itself and play a meaningful role in helping the international community support local populations in creating the conditions where they have the confidence and freedom to make sovereign decisions. This means, for example, that conceptualized ideals such as “soft power” and popular activities like “peacekeeping” will sometimes need to give way to more robust Whole-of-Government solutions encompassing diplomacy, aid, development assistance, and institution building – backed up when needed with the armed force necessary to allow those efforts to be effective.

The inherently long-term nature of defence policy means that it needs a reasonable degree of stability between administrations and so its development is most effectively done when the process is as non-partisan as possible. This does not mean that there is no room for diversity of viewpoints on the future defence capability needs of the nation, or for core ideologies of political parties to influence defence policy development. However, it does mean that parties need to exercise caution in making politically or ideologically-driven commitments to acquire capabilities that future governments may not be able to afford to sustain, or divest capabilities and inappropriately handcuff future governments’ abilities to respond to the defence and security challenges of their day.

2. Focus on the Future Strategic Direction

A better approach is to focus on setting out the party’s strategic view of the direction in which it plans to evolve Canada’s defence policy. Will it be towards an inward-looking focus or a more traditional outward-looking focus? If inward-looking, then the Canadian Armed Forces will need to be reoriented from their current general-purpose capabilities towards a home defence and internal security role. However, it would be extremely unwise for any government to try to implement such a complex and significant change all at once. The party would be better advised to simply commit in its platform to a process of progressive reorientation in the normal course of decision-making on the retirement or replacement of existing capabilities, or acquisition of new ones. As long as this progressive transition is sustained by subsequent administrations, the party’s presumed objective of constraining their own and future governments’ use of the Canadian Armed Forces for

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expeditionary tasks would be gradually achieved as the residual capacity to do them is removed. Further, if a party is considering any dramatic shift in policy it will be best for them and the nation if, prior to starting implementation, there is a broad and significant national discussion. This will mitigate accusations of partisanship and ensure that decisions are taken on the basis of appropriately inclusive input beyond what could otherwise be perceived as the narrow political or ideological perspectives of a single group.

If the focus is more outward-looking, then a wider range of general purpose expeditionary capabilities will be needed, much along the lines of what most Canadian defence policy statements since the Second World War have called for. By their nature, expeditionary capabilities will usually inherently also provide a robust domestic response capacity.

The question then becomes whether the nation requires a balance of military capabilities able to respond across the full spectrum of conflict, up to and including combat, or should they be optimized only for particular areas of the spectrum? If the latter, which areas? Election platforms may not be the place to address these questions in detail, but if the party forms government it will need to have thought them through carefully.

The next decision is what proportion of the nation’s wealth should be committed to re-sourcing its defence forces? Unlike earlier times, 21st Century military forces cannot be rapidly scaled up or down at will to any great degree, and some capabilities take a decade or more to build. Future governments will only have the defence capacity they inherit from their predecessors, so defining a rational strategic view of what resource levels are adequate to likely future need is just as essential as deciding what those forces will be capable of doing.

Finally, parties need to base their consideration of these complex questions upon their thinking on the role they envisage for Canada in the world. If that vision includes a substantive leadership role as a G7 (Group of Seven) country, and the ability to effectively defend our global interests, then the government will need to commit the resources required to maintain balanced, flexible, and well-trained defence forces with the ability to project internationally. If the conclusion is that we should retrench within a more limited geostrategic posture, then it can afford to consider divesting expeditionary capabilities, and focus on the middle and lower ends of the conflict spectrum. It is important that parties be clear with Canadians on these questions during and, for that matter, between elections.

Once the Election is Over

After the election, the party or parties that form the government will be faced with the task of actually delivering on their commitments. More importantly, they will take over responsibility for the stewardship of the nation's defence policy and military capabilities, and this is an area of risk that needs to be well understood and managed.

Capabilities can, of course, be divested by deliberate intent, but they can also be lost through neglect and either way are difficult and expensive to rebuild. Canada has experienced capability losses through neglect a number of times; for example, the loss of the Royal Canadian Navy's submarine capability in 2000 with the forced retirement of its Oberon-class submarines without immediate replacement. Only recently, and after great effort and expense, has it fully regained this critical capability with its Victoria class fleet. The recent similar loss of the Navy's at-sea replenishment capabilities (perhaps to be partly and belatedly made up for by an interim commercial vessel) will also require considerable effort to rebuild down the road.

These recurring gaps in important Canadian Armed Forces' capabilities, and the continued operation of a number of major fleets well beyond their optimum life spans, are problems that are not unique to any one administration. They are also not, as some may claim, the result of bureaucratic bungling by the Department of National Defence. They arise because the basic interdepartmental machinery of government supporting the management of defence capabilities is not up to the job,⁵ and until this is fixed all parties forming government will be bedevilled by this chronic inability to properly meet their defence stewardship responsibilities.

Factors such as the inability of National Defence to undertake even basic project definition work without the approval of multiple ministers, and the natural challenges all governments have in considering expenditure priorities for activities that will only bear fruit years or even a decade or more into the future, are but two of the impediments embedded in the current government machinery.⁶

The problem is not simple and if it could be fixed by the bureaucracy it would have been by now. The experience of other nations would strongly suggest that effective solutions will only be found by governments working collaboratively and on a reasonably non-partisan, long-term basis with Parliament.

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Conclusion

Party election platforms are important statements of intent and define the direction the party intends to take the country. It is important that the defence-related commitments be carefully thought through with a clear understanding of the context within which the party, if it forms government, will be operating. The time horizons involved in defence policy and defence capability management are such that, unlike most other policy areas, the ministers of any given government are their stewards, not their owners. The decisions they make typically have little strategic impact today but major impact on future governments.

The purpose of this article is to offer advice to the parties as they consider the commitments that they might make, with a view to encouraging them to carefully and objectively define credible positions that are consistent with Canada's long-term interests. It cautions against making commitments designed primarily to score political points, both because of the damage that can be done to the nation's interests and the damage that can be done to the party itself. Finally, it offers some sobering perspectives on the challenges that will be faced by any party forming government after the election.

While the current political dynamics in Canada tend to push all parties towards partisanship on issues, defence policies and capabilities are best managed in the nation's interest when a less partisan dialogue is pursued and issues are examined objectively, methodically, and collaboratively. This ideal is unlikely to be met any time soon, but parties are encouraged to at least internally approach defence policy and capability management issues with more objectivity and disciplined thought, and less ideology and partisanship. Over time, Canadians can hope that this may lead to more effective long-term management of Canada's defence institution. The CDA Institute, and others interested in Canada's security and defence, stand ready to support them in the effort.

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Notes

1. The rapid acquisition of the Royal Canadian Air Force's initial C-17 fleet within 18 months was a rare exception and only possible because the government took advantage of a window of opportunity for quick delivery from the manufacturer, and elected to use the company's global support service for the aircraft rather than building a separate national sustainment capability.
2. The author has more comprehensively described the defence business in *Defence Transformation and Renewal: Teeth, Tails and Other Myths*, Vimy Paper 18 (Ottawa: Conference of Defence Associations Institute, May 2014), <http://www.cdainstitute.ca/images/DaviesMay2014.pdf>.
3. The text here describing military capabilities first appeared in the Canadian Military Journal in an article by the author. See Charles Davies, "Understanding Defence Procurement," *Canadian Military Journal*, 15, 2 (Spring 2015), pp. 5-15, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/index-eng.asp>. Repeated here with permission.
4. The CDA Institute publishes an annual Strategic Outlook for Canada. The 2015 version is accessible at: http://www.cdainstitute.ca/images/Vimy_Paper_22.pdf. Parties are, of course, at liberty to consider other perspectives and undertake their own analyses, but the breadth of analysis and level of rigour need to be at least comparable to this.
5. Canada's military requirements determination and defence procurement machinery, key elements of this, are discussed in some detail in Davies, "Understanding Defence Procurement," pp. 5-15.
6. For a comprehensive practical analysis of the impact of this on major defence equipment and re-equipment projects see David Perry, *Putting the 'Armed' Back Into the Canadian Armed Forces: Improving Defence Procurement in Canada*, Vimy Paper 21 (Ottawa: Conference of Defence Associations Institute, January 2015), <http://www.cdainstitute.ca/images/vimy-paper-21.pdf>.