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Canada's Defense Policy—Rebuilding Slowly, Deploying Globally

By Richard M. Sanders

In 2017, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued a major defense policy statement entitled *Strong, Secure, Engaged*. Surprisingly, given his government's inclination to stress the “soft side” of international engagement—support for women's rights, human rights more generally and development—in its rhetoric, the paper calls for a 70 percent increase in defense spending over a ten-year period. How has Canada done in implementing the statement's policy, which entails a major recapitalization of Canada's armed forces? The record is mixed. The decision on how to replace Canada's aging fighter aircraft remains far from resolution with the choice of a new fighter pushed back into the future as a competitive bidding process goes forward. The plans to rebuild the Royal Canadian Navy's fleet, which have also been subject to past delays, seem further along, with key decisions on ship designs made and the first vessels coming out of the yards. Procurement for the Canadian Army, though not wholly immune from issues, seems less ambitious and less troubled than that of its sister services.

While they await new equipment, Canada's armed forces are active globally, although in smaller numbers than during the mid-2000s when a Canadian battle group was fighting hard in Afghanistan. Canada provides the command post in Latvia for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states, and has provided training and non-lethal equipment to Ukraine's armed forces. It has participated in air and maritime presence missions along NATO's southeastern flank, over and on the Black Sea. It is training Iraq's armed forces and participating in counter-terrorism patrols in the Arabian Sea.

Americans have a stake in Canada's defense decisions. Shared perceptions of global threats mean that Canada's forward engagements, if relatively small-scale, support U.S. objectives and contribute to alliance cohesion. And, while Canada is not likely to meet the NATO goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense, its planned increases will improve its capabilities. The range of Canadian deployments also gives substance to Canada's argument that it makes a contribution to global security that is not captured merely by looking at spending levels, as does the quality of its personnel, which make it one of the most

highly valued partners for the U.S. in overseas operations.

The Policy Statement — Help is Coming

On June 7, 2017, the government of Canada issued *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defense Policy*, a policy paper setting out the defense policy framework and objectives of the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who assumed office in November 2015.¹ It laid out missions for Canada's armed forces, and proposed immediate and longer-term defense spending levels as well as plans for force size and structure and for major capital investments. The military's job captures a broad swath of obligations:

- To “defend, detect and deter” threats against Canada itself and against North America through Canada's NORAD partnership with the U.S.;
- To lead and/or participate through NATO in efforts against adversaries, including terrorism; to lead and/or participate through the United Nations and other multilateral groupings in peace operations and stabilization missions;
- To engage in capacity building to support the security of other nations;
- To provide assistance to civil authorities and law enforcement in support of national security, including counterterrorism;
- To provide assistance to authorities and non-governmental partners to respond to disasters and other emergencies; and
- To conduct search and rescue operations.

Strong, Secure, Engaged sets forth the goal of ensuring an “agile, multi-purpose combat-ready military operated by highly trained, well-equipped women and men.” The projected goal would be to increase the overall size of the uniformed services at 71,500, an increase of 3,500 over the officially stated size of 68,000. The reserves would also rise to 30,000.²

The policy statement foresees a major recapitalization of Canada's military. Defense spending is to rise from C\$18.9 billion in 2017 to C\$32.7 billion in 2027, a dramatic 70 percent increase. The Royal Canadian Navy is to receive new surface vessels, largely replacing the current complement of frigates. The Canadian Army's vehicle fleet will be replaced, and its command and control systems modernized. The Royal Canadian Air Force is to receive new fighter aircraft and

¹ Government of Canada, “[Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defense Policy](#),” (June 2017).

² Canadian reservists can only be deployed internationally on a volunteer basis. Nevertheless, significant numbers did deploy to Afghanistan.

new anti-submarine warfare and surveillance aircraft. Canada's special operations forces will have their operational capacity and unique capabilities expanded.

Taking Diversity and Welfare Seriously

The paper highlights several special subjects of interest to the Trudeau government. Notably the presence of women in the armed forces is to increase from 15 to 25 percent over a ten-year period, together with a broader focus on diversity. The government further commits itself to renewed attention to the conditions in which the armed forces serve, specifically health care and veterans benefits.

Improved benefits for armed forces personnel also received special emphasis in subsequent budget statements and comments by political leaders. It is notable that much of Canada's public discourse responding to *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, has been focused on resources to be dedicated to the welfare of members of the armed forces, rather than details of its aggressive procurement plans or the deployments of personnel and equipment abroad.

When Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan was asked in December 2018 about what he was most proud of during his first year as minister. He responded that he took most pride in the fact that "our defense policy is focused on taking care of our people." He went on to say that while major procurement projects were "absolutely important... this whole conversation of more teeth, less tail—I hate that. In reality making sure that your pension cheques are delivered on time is just as important."³

Playing the Percentages

Any discussion regarding Canada's current and future defense spending must take into account the commitment made at the 2014 Wales NATO summit for member states to raise defense spending over ten years to two percent of GDP (20 percent of which is to be spent on new equipment). The U.S., which spends approximately 3.4 percent of GDP on defense and accounts for 70 percent of NATO defense spending, pressed its allies to agree to this goal in the face of considerable reluctance, including from Canada. While the Wales commitment originated with the Obama administration, the Trump administration upped the ante for spending increases, and at one point even informally called upon NATO countries to spend four percent of GDP on defense.

How is Canada doing? In 2017, it spent US\$19.837 billion on defense representing 1.36 percent of GDP. Spending in 2018 is estimated at 1.23 percent of GDP. Government spokespersons attributed the year-on-year decline to the fact that 2017 included both a retroactive pay increase and a special payment into the account for military pensions. Defense spending as a percentage of GDP had previously hovered around 1 percent; however, the Canadian government revised

3 Charles Pinkerton, "[A Year-end Q&A with Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan](#)," *iPolitics* (December 31, 2018).

its methodology to include certain pension payments, police participation in peacekeeping missions, as well as Coast Guard and other operations, which it said were being included in other NATO member states' calculations.⁴

A May 2019 review of defense spending by the Canadian Global Affairs Institute concluded that the “Trudeau government is mostly delivering the money needed for *Strong, Secure, Engaged*,” but spending on equipment and infrastructure has lagged. Spending lags are attributed to positive reasons such as project efficiencies, and money set aside for contingencies not being needed, as well as negative ones such as delays on the part of industry or on the part of government. Nonetheless, “trend lines (on capital spending) are positive.”⁵

Should the projected spending increase to C\$32.7 billion through 2028 materialize, Canada would be spending 1.4 percent of GDP, a significant increase to be sure but well below the 2 percent Wales summit goal. Indeed, there is no suggestion in the policy statement that Canada will ever arrive at that goal.

There is, of course, a vigorous debate as to the merits of the two-percent metric, with some arguing that its “conceptual flaws” render it “barely useful.”⁶ Some NATO member states have large conscript armies whose pay ratchets up national spending in terms of percentage of GDP devoted to defense. Canada's argument focuses on the quality of its commitment: its participation in important NATO missions and the caliber of its forces—including highly trained personnel with specialized capabilities such as Joint Task Force 2, a tier-one special operations force which was active in Afghanistan and reportedly Iraq.

Still it is undeniable that there is some relation between military expenditure and defense capability, and the Wales goal is not likely to be abandoned by the U.S. government or other advocates for higher military spending.

Parliament Giveth, Parliament Can Take Away

Most of Canada's proposed spending increases for the next decade are in the “out years.”

Inevitably, major capital programs will be funded over multiple years, while Canada's Parliament, like the U.S. Congress, approves budgets annually. During the 1990s, Canada's defense spending was severely restricted as part of overall budget restraints, and the size of the uniformed services fell to almost 60,000. This serves as a reminder that pro-military policies can be reversed. Troop strength can be reduced and equipment purchases can be postponed, spread out over longer periods or even cancelled. Should Canada face another major economic downturn, it is unlikely that defense would be spared from any austerity drive. And to the extent that Canada's procurement process remains sluggish, unspent money is

4 Lee Berthiaume, “[Canada Expected to Spend Less on Defence in 2018 than in Last Year: NATO Report](#),” *Canadian Press*, (July 10, 2018).

5 David Perry, “[Strong, Secure, Engaged: a Two Year Review](#),” *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, (May 2019).

6 Jan Techau, “[The Politics of 2 Percent: NATO and the Security Vacuum in Europe](#),” *Carnegie Europe*, (September 2015).

always vulnerable to being re-appropriated elsewhere.

The Painful History of Military Procurement

Canada's system for buying large-scale military equipment has had difficulties which pre-date the Trudeau government. A 2013 study asserted that "successive Canadian governments have been over-promising and under-delivering on defence procurement."⁷ Perhaps the most famous example of the struggle to acquire big ticket defense items was the effort to replace Canada's 1960s vintage Sikorsky CH 124 Sea King maritime helicopters, which began in 1986. This procurement was marked by multiple changes in the specifications and delays resulting from budgetary constraints. The first deliveries of the replacement, the Sikorsky CH148 Cyclone, did not take place until 2015.

The Harper government made an effort to rationalize procurement policy through its 2014 Defence Procurement Strategy, which is aimed at facilitating timely deliveries by assuring early engagement with industry as a requirement is being developed and including input from government agencies and independent evaluators, while assuring economic benefit to Canada.⁸ Nonetheless, problems have continued. David Perry identifies "a procurement workforce [that] was too small and had little experience managing complex files."⁹ He urges increases in the procurement bureaucracy including allowing greater flexibility in hiring persons with relevant expertise.

Canada's procurements are affected by the perennial reluctance to buy off-the-shelf products from foreign manufacturers without "Canadianizing" them to meet specific needs. This can create a product better suited for Canada's demanding geography and specific missions but at the cost of added expense and delay. Also, Canada, like many countries, takes an industrial policy approach to procurement, pressing for offsets to assure that to the extent possible production takes place within Canada.

Air Force — Waiting for the Plane

Perhaps the most criticized procurement process has been the effort, not yet concluded, to find a replacement for Canada's McDonnell-Douglas (now Boeing) CF-18 Hornet fighter/attack aircraft. Prior to, and theoretically separate from, a formal, final decision on a replacement, Canada had been one of the original nine countries participating in the development of the Lockheed-Martin F-35 Lightning II. This first fifth-generation fighter using stealth technology to reduce its radar signature was planned for service in the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine

7 Elinor Sloan, "Canadian Defence Commitments: Overview and Status of Selected Acquisitions and Initiatives." *University of Calgary: School of Public Policy*, (December 4, 2013).

8 J. Craig Stone, "Implementing the Defence Procurement Strategy: Is it Working?," *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, (July 2016).

9 David Perry, "[Fixing Procurement](#)," *Vanguard Canada*, (August 26, 2016).

Corps. Canada's participation, which entailed significant monetary commitments, allowed Canadian firms to be considered for roles in supplying components on a "value and capability" basis rather than as offsets negotiated as part of a final sale. In 2010 the Harper government announced its intention to purchase 65 F-35's to replace its CF-18s. This was done without a competitive tender.

The decision soon faced controversy. An Auditor General's report asserted that the price would be vastly higher than anticipated and the capabilities were not suited for Canada. Although the Harper government aggressively defended its interest in the F-35, by December 2012 the controversy had reached a point that it declared that the decision to purchase the aircraft would be "reset." It then sought information from several aircraft producers (including Lockheed Martin) regarding capabilities. In 2013 Boeing provided cost and capability data on its F/A-18 Super Hornet, while France's Dassault aggressively promoted the capabilities of its Rafale twin engine aircraft.

By 2015, no contract had been signed, and the fighter procurement became part of the national electoral campaign with the opposition Liberals' platform flatly stating: "We will not purchase the F-35 stealth fighter bomber." It promised to hold a competition to pick "one of the many, lower-priced options that better match Canada's defence needs."¹⁰ It defined these needs as "the defence of North America, not stealth first-strike capability."

After the Trudeau government took office, both the Defense Minister and the Minister of Public Services took a different stance, indicating that they did not rule out including the F-35 in a future competition, and, in December 2016 the Defense Minister announced the government's intention to purchase from Boeing eighteen new F/A-18E/F Super Hornets as an interim measure, allowing it to postpone the decision on a permanent replacement for Canada's CF-18s.¹¹ However, it subsequently cancelled this decision after Boeing filed a trade action over subsidies provided by the Canadian government to Quebec-based Bombardier for civil aircraft.

The next development came in September 2018 when it was announced that Canada would buy 18 used Hornets from Australia to keep Canada's own Hornets flying until a full competition could be held and a permanent aircraft purchased. The competition began with the solicitation of bids in July 2019, with first deliveries to take place in 2025.¹² A total of 88 fighters are now to be purchased. In addition to Lockheed Martin's F-35 and Boeing's F/A-18 Super Hornet, Saab's (Sweden) Gripen and Airbus/BAE's (Europe/UK) Typhoon are competing. France's Dassault has dropped out.

While Canada prepares for a competition, it is keeping its existing fleet of Hornets in the air either by augmenting it with the Australian aircraft or cannibalizing them for parts. Australia, it must be noted, is able to part with

10 *Liberal Party of Canada*, "[What Does Real Change Mean to You?](#)," (2015).

11 The Super Hornet is a greatly upgraded version of the Hornet, which Canada possesses, although it is sufficiently similar to allow for ease in pilot training.

12 Wikipedia, "[Lockheed-Martin F-35 Lightning II Canadian Procurement](#)," (July 29, 2019).

its Hornets because it is starting to take delivery of its F-35s. In addition to Australia, the U.S., Britain, Italy, Japan and South Korea have taken delivery of the F-35. Belgium, which was not among the original nine partners has also joined the consortium.

Unquestionably, the F-35 is an extremely expensive system, and the fact that the Harper government never held a competitive bidding process rendered it vulnerable during a political campaign. Buying the F-35 will allow Canada to participate in any likely future scenario where air power is required, albeit expensively. Buying one of the other three competing aircraft may save money, but also may limit the missions in which Canada participates. Also they are older systems, which may be outlived by the F-35. And buying any non-U.S. system could raise interoperability questions.

Navy — Anchors Aweigh, Eventually

As per the strategy outlined in *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, Canada's Navy, is due for a major procurement, one that when finished, will amount to a complete recapitalization of the existing fleet. While the bulk of this effort, termed the National Shipbuilding Strategy, is still in the future, some progress has been made, leaving the Navy's procurement process further along than that of the Air Force. The Royal Canadian Navy consists of four former British Upholder-class diesel submarines, twelve Halifax-class frigates dating from the 1990s and refurbished starting in 2007, twelve coastal defense vessels, and eight unarmed patrol/training vessels. To help cover the gap created by the decommissioning of two re-supply ships, the Navy has purchased and converted a privately owned vessel for use until permanent ones are built.¹³

Canada's purchase of used British submarines was initially controversial. One of these submarines, HMCS Chicoutimi, suffered a major fire on its initial voyage, requiring repairs, which kept it from being operational for several years. Nonetheless, over time problems appear to have been mitigated. The Navy points out that HMCS Chicoutimi completed a 187-day deployment to the Pacific in 2017-2018 while another submarine, HMCS Windsor, cruised in the Mediterranean. The Department of National Defence has announced its intention to undertake work to extend the four submarines' service life into the mid-2030s.¹⁴

At the heart of Canada's reconstruction of its Navy are plans to replace its Halifax-class frigates and Iroquois-class destroyers (none in service any more) with a new class of vessel. Some progress took place under the Harper government, with Irving Shipbuilding in Halifax designated as the prime contractor. In 2016 the Trudeau government announced that it would base its design on an existing "off-the-shelf" model rather than design the new frigate

13 Wikipedia, "[Royal Canadian Navy](#)," (July 27, 2019).

14 Lee Berthiaume, "[Canadian Navy Decides to Start Upgrades to Extend Life of Aging Submarine Fleet](#)," *Canadian Press*, (January 22, 2019).

from scratch. In October 2018 it announced that its preferred bidder was a design proposed by BAE Systems (UK), together with Lockheed Martin (U.S.), based on the British Type 26 Global Combat ship. The anticipated cost is US\$49 billion for 15 ships, spread out through to 2040.

The decision has not been without controversy. One of the losing bidders, Alion (U.S.), has challenged the decision in Canada's court system, arguing that the winning design did not meet bidding specifications with regard to speed. While not dismissing the case, the court has allowed contract signing to go forward.¹⁵ The first of the British Navy's own Type 26's, HMS Glasgow, is still under construction, and is not expected to be delivered until 2023, leading some to claim Canada is working from a "paper ship," not a proven design. However, proponents of the ship argue that Canada will still have the benefit of lessons learned from the construction of the Type 26 for both Britain and Australia, which is also purchasing it. They note that the Canadian version will differ from the British original by only ten percent, limiting the prospect for delays and overruns from customizing the vessel. The frigates are multi-purpose, including air defense and anti-shipping capability, but also will have a capability in anti-submarine warfare, a traditional Cold War specialty of the Canadian Navy.

The third element in Canada's naval procurement is the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship (also called the Harry DeWolf class ship). The Canadian government plans to buy six to eight relatively small (340 feet long), lightly armed vessels which would patrol Canada's Atlantic and Pacific coastal waters, principally for humanitarian and disaster-relief contingencies. The ships are designed to also operate in Arctic waters, with a capacity to break ice up to three meters in thickness. BMT Group (UK) has the contract to design the ships, and Irving Shipbuilding is building them. One ship has already been built and is currently being tested. The Canadian government has committed to building six ships in this class, which, it is suggested, will keep the Halifax workforce intact until the mid-2020s when the construction of the planned frigates will begin.

The principal criticism of this program (aside from cost which has increased significantly from initial estimates) is the limited ice-breaking capacity. The ships are unable to cut through deep, multi-year ice, and have been dubbed "slush-breakers" by opponents.¹⁶ A full-capability icebreaker is planned at Vancouver's Seaspan shipyard for Canada's civilian Coast Guard. It is unclear when it will actually be built, as the Navy's Joint Support Ship, (see below), which is also to be built at Seaspan, has been given priority. Advocates for greater icebreaking capability point out that Russia has as many as forty icebreakers of all classes, including heavy icebreakers, and has announced plans for construction of an extremely large (673 feet long) nuclear-powered ship. The U.S. has one heavy icebreaker, which dates from the 1970s, and has received an appropriation to build a replacement.

15 George Allen, "[Canadian Type 26 Order Back on Track](#)," *UK Defence Journal*, (December 14, 2018).

16 Conor Smith, "[Procurement for Canada's Arctic Sovereignty Mission: Slush-Making or Path-Breaking](#)," *NATO Association of Canada*, (March 7, 2014).

The fourth element of Canada's National Shipbuilding Strategy is the construction of replacements for its re-supply ships, which provide ships at sea with fuel, ammunition, spare parts, food and water. While the need for new re-supply ships was identified as early as 2006, delays in the decision-making process meant that by 2014 the Navy was forced to scrap its last two (of originally four) supply ships, and undertake a number of stop-gap measures. For some joint exercises, Canada has relied upon the U.S. Navy to re-supply its vessels. It has also leased Chilean and Spanish ships for short periods of time. More recently, it has addressed the need for an interim re-supply capacity by purchasing and converting a German-built container ship, the MV Asterix, which entered into service in January 2018. The purchase and refitting of the Asterix was accomplished on time and within budget by Davie Shipbuilding of Quebec.

Meanwhile the process of finding a permanent re-supply vessel continues. The Department of National Defense has announced its intention to have a Joint Support Ship built by Seaspan in Vancouver, based on KruppThyssen Marine's (Germany) 20,240-ton Berlin class re-supply vessel. Under the *Strong, Secure, Engaged* strategy, two support ships will ultimately be built. Critics note that the capabilities have been scaled back from original concepts which included the ability to provide support for troops engaged in amphibious landings. They also argue that other off-the-shelf designs, such as one used by the United Kingdom, would have been cheaper.¹⁷

Army — Some Upgrades Coming

The Canadian Army has largely been spared the procurement agonies of the Navy and Air Force. This may be due to the nature of land warfare, which is relatively less dependent on complex technological systems. Even so, a stated goal of *Strong, Secure, Engaged* for the Canadian Army is “recapitaliz(ing) many core capabilities, such as command, control and communications systems, weapons and soldier night vision systems, and logistic vehicle fleets.”

Several procurements begun earlier have progressed since the publication of the policy statement. Work on C\$1.5 billion in contracts with manufacturer General Dynamics for upgrades to the Light Armored Vehicle (LAV III) – which was heavily used in Afghanistan – are going forward. Upgrades of surveillance systems to 550 vehicles are expected to be completed by December 2019.¹⁸ The Tactical Armored Patrol Vehicle (TAPV), a smaller armored car, was initially ordered from Textron (U.S.) at a cost of C\$708 million in 2012. Initial deliveries have been taken by the Army. While there have been concerns about accidents by operators, the Army believes that the issues relate to training rather than flaws in the vehicle itself.¹⁹ A C\$834 million vehicle contract with U.S. firm Mack (a subsidiary of Sweden's Volvo) to provide 1500 trucks, 300 trailers and 150 armored protection

17 *Defense Industry Daily*, “[Canada's C\\$2.9 Billion Joint Support Ship Project, Take 3](#),” (April 9, 2019).

18 *Wikipedia*, “[LAV III](#),” (May 31, 2019).

19 David Pugliese, “[Fires and Rollovers Plague Canadian Army's \\$600 Million Fleet of Armored Vehicles](#),” *National Post*, (January 14, 2019).

systems has been the subject of a case mounted by losing competitor Oshkosh (U.S.) and could cost the Canadian government as much as C\$60 million.²⁰

The size of the Canadian Army (23,000 regulars, 19,000 reservists) has been relatively stable, and is not expected to grow or shrink greatly in the foreseeable future.

Special Operations — A Canadian Comparative Advantage

Although the missions of Canada's special operations forces are not publicized, it is known that they were active in Afghanistan and in other missions around the world. Though small, with only 2,000 members, they are often cited as an example of the high-quality forces which Canada can bring to bear, which, it is argued, offset low overall defense spending. Grouped under the joint Canadian Special Operations Forces Command are four components:

- Joint Task Force 2, a Tier-One force like the U.S.'s Delta Force and SEAL Team Six, with capabilities in counter terrorism, hostage rescue, etc.;
- Canadian Special Operations Regiment which, like the U.S. Army's 75th Ranger Regiment, has the capability to conduct complex raids, capture strategic facilities, and conduct reconnaissance, as well as to train with foreign partners;
- 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron, which provides air support; and
- Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit, which addresses chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats.²¹

Strong, Secure, Engaged calls for 605 new personnel dedicated to special operations. It also calls for improved command, control, and airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms and recapitalizing armored vehicles for special operations. Expenditures ranging from C\$50 to 99 million through 2022 are anticipated for Special Operations Task Forces in areas such as battlespace situational awareness tools, encryption, navigation systems and portable communications systems.²² The Canadian Special Operations Regiment is to receive C\$259 to 499 million through 2022 for essential equipment, including electro-optical systems.²³ A recent news story suggested that Canadian Special Operations Forces Command was considering directly recruiting civilians with special skills (computer, language, etc.) rather than recruiting only persons already

20 David Pugliese, "[Tens of Millions Paid Out Due to Bungled Canadian Forces Procurement, but Government says Details are Secret](#)," *National Post*, (January 20, 2019).

21 Roderick Ramsden, "[A Case for Investing in Canada's Special Forces](#)," *NATO Association of Canada*. (April 20, 2016).

22 [Government](#) of Canada. Defence Investment Plan, 2018. "Special Operations Task Forces Command and Control."

23 [Government](#) of Canada. Defence Investment Plan, 2018. "Canadian Special Operations Regiment Equipment (Phase 1 and 2.)"

within the armed forces.²⁴

Canada's Global Military Footprint

As Canada works to upgrade its military capabilities, Canadian forces are deployed on missions around the world. Before examining current deployments, it is worth remembering Canada's relatively recent contributions to the war in Afghanistan. Canadian special operators were active in Afghanistan, beginning shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center, and Canada's presence in Afghanistan eventually rose to 2,300 troops who fought against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. Canada ended its combat role in 2011, and maintained a military presence, training Afghan soldiers until 2014. 159 Canadians died in the fighting in Afghanistan, the largest losses for any Canadian military mission since the Korean War.

Today the Department of National Defence lists 30 current operations both within Canada and around the world.²⁵ Many entail the placement of a few soldiers in a larger existing command, such as Operation Kobold where five Canadian soldiers provide headquarters and logistical support to NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR). At the lowest end of the scale is Operation Snowgoose, Canada's contribution to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which consists of one officer stationed in the headquarters staff. Other low-profile deployments include Operation Driftnet, where the Royal Canadian Navy patrols international waters to help enforce the global moratorium on high seas driftnet fishing. However, it would be a mistake to think that Canada does not step up to higher profile missions, even at some strain on its resources as in Eastern Europe or at some risk, as in sub-Saharan Africa.

Canada in the Baltics, Ukraine, Black Sea

Canada contributes to NATO's efforts to provide security in Eastern Europe under the umbrella of Operation Reassurance. NATO has increased its activities in the Eastern European states that once belonged to the Warsaw Pact or were part of the Soviet Union. The need to reach out to these countries, be they NATO members, or linked to NATO through the Partnership for Peace, has come as Russia is perceived to be a greater threat. Concerns about Russia have been rising since its war with Georgia and subsequent seizure of territories in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, its seizure of the Crimea from the Ukraine in 2014, and its sponsorship and military support for insurgents in the Ukraine's Donbass region from 2014 onward.

24 Lee Berthiaume, "[Canadian Forces Looking at Recruiting Elite Special Forces Soldiers Right Off the Street](#)," *Global News*, (March 6, 2019).

25 *Government of Canada*, "[Current Operations List](#)," (August 5, 2019).

NATO's response has included an "enhanced forward presence" in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland since 2016 with multinational battalion battle groups stationed in each of these countries. Canada agreed to provide the headquarters for the battalion in Latvia. (The UK is performing this function in Estonia, Germany in Lithuania, and the U.S. in Poland.) The battle group in Latvia also includes forces from Albania, Italy, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. Canada contributes 450 of the 1392 NATO forces stationed in Latvia, most of whom are members of a mechanized infantry battalion with armored fighting vehicles and support elements.²⁶ This marks the return of standing Canadian forces to Europe after the last troops left in 1993 following the end of the Cold War. In July of 2018, Prime Minister Trudeau announced that Canada would renew its commitment to lead the command element in Latvia, due to expire in the Spring of 2019, for an additional four years.

Under the name Operation Unifier, Canada has provided non-lethal military equipment to the Ukraine since 2014 and training to Ukrainian defense forces since 2015. Canada's activity is part of a larger effort that includes the U.S., UK, Sweden, Poland, Lithuania and Denmark. Canada's support for the Ukraine was extended through 2022 in March of 2019.²⁷ Two hundred Canadian Armed Forces members are stationed in the Ukraine where they provide training in combined arms operations, military engineering, logistics, military policing, and field medicine.

Over 10,000 members of Ukraine's defense forces have received training from Canadians. Military equipment provided to Ukraine includes ballistic eyewear, bullet-proof vests, first aid kits, helmets, sleeping bags, and tents, as well as coats, pants, boots and gloves. More sophisticated gear such as tactical communications equipment and explosive ordnance disposal equipment has been provided more recently. Canada does not provide lethal military assistance to Ukraine, but permits commercial sales.

Canada has also provided air and naval support to NATO's efforts along its eastern flank, despite aging assets. In 2018, it sent five CF-18 fighters and 145 Air Force personnel to Romania for four months to participate in Black Sea air policing. It has made similar short-term air deployments in the past, sending aircraft to Lithuania in 2014 and Iceland (the only NATO member state without its own armed forces) in 2016. A Canadian frigate patrolled the Black Sea in March-April of 2019.

Still Present in the Middle East

After Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister, his decision to withdraw Canadian aircraft from the NATO-led campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria raised questions about Canada's commitment. However, Canada still maintained a ground presence including providing special forces to train and equip anti-ISIS

²⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "[NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence](#)," (December 5, 2018).

²⁷ Government of Canada, "[Canada extends its military training mission in Ukraine](#)," (March 18, 2019).

fighters, particularly the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq. By 2018, Canada ceased training of the Kurdish forces, as ISIS faded as a military force while concerns over Kurdish separatism remained. One pending unresolved matter is what to do with C\$10 million worth of small arms, ammunition, and optical sights originally destined for the Kurds but never delivered. The weapons remain in a warehouse in Montreal; a Conservative MP has urged that they be provided to the Ukrainian defense forces.²⁸

Canada maintains its military commitment in Iraq, termed Operation Impact. Approximately 500 Canadian military personnel provide training, advice and assistance to Iraqi security forces. In March of 2019, Canada announced that it would extend its participation until March 2021. A Canadian major general commands the NATO training mission in Iraq. Canadian warships patrol the Persian Gulf and eastern coast of Africa under Operation Artemis, Canada's contribution to the 30-nation Combined Maritime Forces whose mission is to combat terrorism and assure maritime safety in the Middle East. One Canadian frigate and Canada's resupply ship participate. Canada also provides staff for Combined Maritime Forces' headquarters in Bahrain.

A Cautious Return to Peacekeeping in Mali

The limits of Canada's will to engage in missions abroad are illustrated by the saga of Operation Presence, Canada's participation in the United Nations Multi-Dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) in Mali, which formally began in July 2018 and was scheduled to end in July 2019 (since extended until the end of August). When Canada announced in 2017 that it would return to peace operations, this was seen as fulfillment of Justin Trudeau's pledge, made shortly after his landslide electoral victory, that "as a compassionate and constructive voice in the world, we're back."

Canada had been a major contributor to United Nations-sponsored peacekeeping operations in the 1950s and 60s, with major commitments in Suez after the 1956 fighting between Israel and Egypt, as well as in Cyprus and the Congo. However, during the past decade Canada reduced its peacekeeping activity to near zero. Canada's return to this field was seen by many as restoring an ideological commitment to the UN and multilateralism. It has also been seen by some observers as an effort to bolster credentials which would allow Canada to gain a rotating position on the United Nations Security Council. Canada had unsuccessfully sought a UN seat in 2010 during the Harper government. In 2016, Trudeau announced that Canada would seek a seat coming vacant in 2021.

In March of 2018, Canada announced that it would send an air task force to MINUSMA for one year, taking over this role from Germany. The core mission is to provide 24/7 medical air evacuation for MINUSMA's 11,000 peacekeepers, although the task force can also transport troops for rapid response missions. MINUSMA operates in a very complex and demanding environment. Its origins lay in a separatist insurgency in northern Mali. After the insurgency was initially

²⁸ *The Canadian Press*, "[Canadian Weapons Destined for Kurds Should Go to Ukraine Instead: Conservatives](#)," (May 28, 2019).

resolved through negotiations, French forces provided security in the region, and then handed the mission of keeping the peace to MINUSMA. Despite the large UN presence, the situation in Mali has remained unstable with continued insurgent attacks, involvement by Islamist extremists, displaced populations and human rights abuses.

Canada has committed 250 soldiers to this mission. It maintains three CH-147F Chinook helicopters for the evacuation/troop transport mission and five CH-146 Griffon helicopters to provide protection for the Chinooks, Canada's forces appear to have successfully carried out their mission, conducting eight medical evacuations.²⁹ However, the mission has been narrowly constrained both in scope and duration. Unlike its predecessor in the mission, Germany, Canada is limiting itself to providing protection to its Chinooks in their evacuation mission; it does not provide protection to any forces on the ground. (El Salvador is undertaking this role.) The UN formally requested that Canada extend its mission in Mali to avoid a gap before Romania takes over in October 2019 but Canada, after initially rejecting any further extension, agreed to stay on through the end of August.

While one might have concluded from Trudeau's assertion that "we're back" that the Mali operation was only the beginning of a significant new commitment to peacekeeping, in fact no new operations have been announced, and, as Canada enters an election cycle, such announcements are not expected. Clearly Canada is cautious about entering the new world of peace operations where the distinction is blurred between peacekeeping and counter-insurgency. That said, Canada does maintain some activity in the troubled Sahel region of North Africa outside of the UN framework. It periodically provides airlift support to France's Operation Barkhane counter-terrorism effort throughout the region, and maintains a 24-person military training mission in Niger.

The Arctic Dimension

Although not part of its overseas deployments, Canada's military presence in its north is relevant not only in terms of reaffirming its sovereignty over a vast, lightly populated area, but also in projecting power and maintaining security in a zone of strategic importance. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* highlights the Arctic as part of the global context of Canada's foreign and defense policies. While the eight member states of the Arctic Council have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, Canada foresees an "increasingly accessible" Arctic, with concomitant prospects for tourism and commercial activity in and around Canada's northern territory and increased "safety and security demands." The paper alludes to the return of great power competition as a feature of the international system, but stops short of identifying the Arctic as a theater of such competition.³⁰

29 Ousmane Aly Diallo, "[Why the End of Operation Presence Couldn't Come at a Worse Time for the UN in Mali](#)," *OpenCanada.org*, (April 9, 2019).

30 *Government of Canada*, "[Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defense Policy](#)," (July 2019), 50-51.

This relatively low-key statement of Canada's interests contrasts with U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's statement at the May 2019 meeting of the Arctic Council in which he expressly identified the Arctic as "an arena for power and competition...(to which) the Arctic Council states must adapt." He went on to criticize China's claim that it is a "near-Arctic state" and Russia's assertion that the Northern Sea Route is an internal waterway. He also stated that Canada's similar claim to the Northwest Passage is "illegitimate," reiterating in especially strong language a long-standing U.S. position.³¹

As Arctic issues take on greater salience, some of the capabilities promised in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* will improve Canada's ability to act in that region. In particular, as the new Arctic offshore patrol ships join the fleet, Canada's will be able to operate more effectively in northern waters, although an icebreaker with full, year-round capabilities is some years away. The new fighter aircraft, whichever it may be, should allow Canada to better carry out its Arctic air defense mission. In May of 2019 Canada announced that its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), the airspace within which identification, location and control of aircraft is undertaken, would extend through Canada's Arctic archipelago up to the North Pole.³² Canada also has committed itself, working with the U.S., to refurbish the North Warning System, the successor to the Cold War-era Distant Early Warning (DEW) line of radars.

Canada continues to maintain a small military installation, on Ellsmere Island, the world's northernmost permanent human settlement. It is also building a naval refueling station near the site of a former mine at Nanisivik on northern Baffin Island. This will be open for only part of the year because of the costs of year-round operation. However, it should allow the new vessels to extend their range of operation in the North.

Although Canada's military holds a major joint annual exercise in the north (Operation Nanook), its principal far-north presence is provided by the Canadian Rangers, a part-time reserve force made up of local inhabitants (many indigenous), who conduct sovereignty patrols using snowmobiles. The Canadian Rangers are in the process of receiving new rifles, Colt C-19s, based on a Finnish model, to replace their World War II-era Lee-Enfield .303 rifles. All in all, we see a slow improvement of Canada's capabilities in the North. At the same time, Canada remains committed to a peaceful, cooperative Arctic even as the region increasingly becomes a subject of global strategic interest.

Keeping Close to the Americans

An important feature of the international engagement of Canada's military is its unique bilateral relationship with the United States, both within NORAD and outside of it. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* puts NORAD first among Canada's defense

31 U.S. Department of State, "[Remarks at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting](#)," (May 7, 2019).

32 Kelsey Lindsey, "[Canada Expands its Air Defense Identification Zone to Cover Arctic Archipelago](#)," *Arctic Today*, (May 29, 2018).

partnerships. Noting the threats to North America's air and maritime domains as well as to emerging ones (space, cyber), Canada commits to "work with the United States to modernize the command." What NORAD Next will be is unclear. One red line that Canada apparently will not cross is participation in the United States' anti-ballistic missile program, which is specifically ruled out in the policy paper.

Aside from NORAD the uniquely dense network of exchanges between the U.S. and Canadian defense establishments continues. On July 19, 2018, the outgoing Canadian defense attaché in Washington spoke at the Wilson Center, where he noted that Canada has over 1,000 military and civilian defense officials working in the United States. He observed that a Canadian general officer is embedded in the office of the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as are Canadian general officers at U.S. Central Command, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and U.S. Cyber Command. He also mentioned the Canadian generals serving as Deputy Commander for Operations at the U.S. Army's First Corps, 18th Airborne Corps and Alaska Command. This is in addition to NORAD where Canadian generals serve as Deputy Commanders of its Alaska and Continental Commands.³³

Conclusion: The Need for Modernization Remains But Canada is a Relevant Global Player

Canada's military has had its ups and downs. It made a major effort in Afghanistan, performing more than credibly and taking significant casualties. But, both before and after its Afghan experience, Canada's armed forces have been tightly resourced, with their numbers shrinking and their equipment aging. The *Strong, Secure, Engaged* policy paper of two years ago may have marked a turning point. It lays out a path forward to re-equip the three services, and outlines tasks for them that seem in keeping with Canada's needs and values.

It remains to be seen whether the momentum will be maintained. While there may be general support now for beefing up Canada's military, we cannot say how this commitment would endure should Canada face a serious economic downturn. There has been almost no public debate about the size and role of the military and such public discussion as there has been seems to focus on issues such as the welfare of the troops and the need for diversity, rather than about their central mission and Canada's overall strategy. Thus, expectations should be tempered despite the optimism suggested by both the policy paper and initial budget commitments.

Rebuilding Canada's armed forces will be arduous. In the meantime, though no longer at war, Canada is deploying vigorously despite its limitations. It can point to substantial efforts, such as a leading role in NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltics and providing training in the Ukraine. But even with planned spending increases, the reality is that Canada is not going to join the top tier of

33 Rear-Admiral William Truelove, "[Canada's Outgoing Defence Attaché: U.S. and Canada Still have Each Other's Back](#)," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (August 13, 2018).

U.S. allies such as Britain and France in approaching the Wales summit goals of putting military spending at 2 percent of GDP. Nonetheless its range of overseas deployments gives substance to the argument that Canada does indeed provide value that is not captured by looking solely at spending ratios. And, if one looks at where Canada is putting its efforts, the congruence with U.S. efforts is very close indeed. For all its limitations Canada is playing a part which Americans should not forget.



About the Author

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