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Real and False Tradeoffs in the Defence Review: Size Versus Readiness, Not Hard Versus Soft

by Stephen M. Saideman
July, 2016



2016 POLICY REVIEW SERIES

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CGAI Fellow

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This essay is one in a series commissioned by Canadian Global Affairs Institute in the context of defence, security and assistance reviews by the Trudeau Government. The views expressed are those of the author and not CGAI. As a Canada Revenue Agency approved charitable organization, CGAI has no 'views' but rather acts as a platform and forum for intelligent discussion of Canadian global affairs policy.



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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8
www.cgai.ca

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ISBN: 978-1-927573-77-8



The Canadian Defence Review is long overdue as other countries revisit the stance of the military on a much more regular basis, such as the American Quadrennial Review. Since the Harper government's Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS) in 2008, much has changed both in the world and in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). These changes have created a mismatch between what Canada faces and what it can do. The temptation is to finesse the shortfalls in military power with a focus on 'soft' power, but as argued below, the demand for the deployment of 'hard' power in the form of the Canadian Armed Forces will not decline. The following text quickly reviews the changes both in the world and in the CAF, moves on to discuss the likely demands placed on Canadian forces over the next five to 10 years, and concludes with some recommendations for what Canada needs down the road.

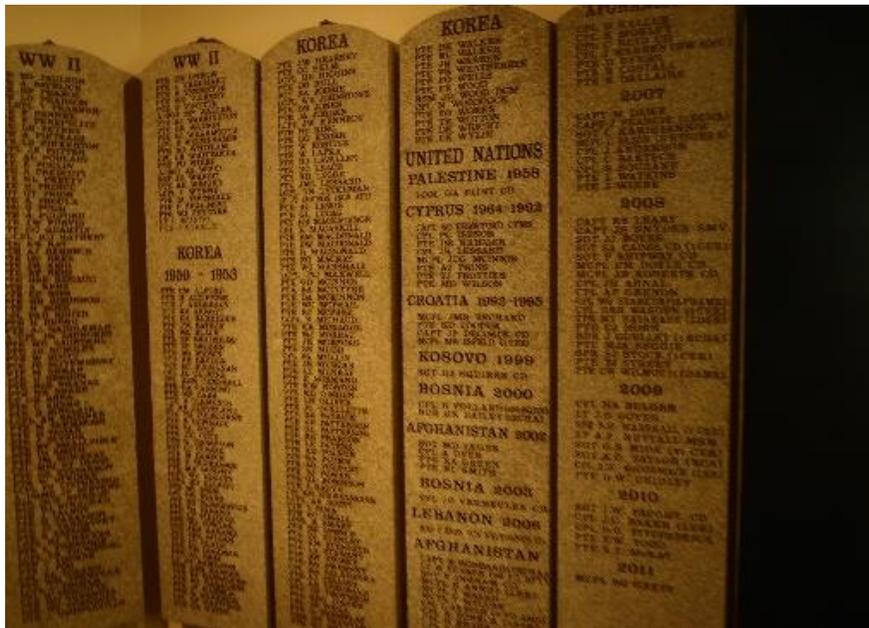
The partnership with Russia is now [dead](#), thanks to the annexation of Crimea and Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to undermine the West wherever he can find opportunities. The Afghanistan effort, which was the focal point of the entire Canadian government but especially the focus of the armed forces, is now mostly an afterthought despite the intensifying civil war. The rise of the Islamic State (ISIL) has led to attacks in Europe and around the world, and contributed to refugee flows that have challenged the very heart of the European Union – the lack of border controls within and yet another coalition of the willing. China is building islands and contesting the boundary claims of nearly all of its neighbours, while facing economic, demographic and environmental crises that might feed nationalism. In sum, Canada and its allies face a very uncertain and potentially threatening world.

Unfortunately, despite years of hard-earned experience in Afghanistan, the CAF are perhaps the least ready they have been since the so-called 'decade of darkness' in the 1990s. The state of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) is simply appalling, as it no longer has any supply ships to support the aging frigates. One remaining destroyer is still left on the list of the ships in the fleet, despite being unable to sail in bad weather. The National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy is years behind schedule, leading the Commander of the RCN, Admiral [Mark Norman, to admit](#) that the goal of 15 surface combatant ships is likely to be unmet. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) keeps extending the lifetime of the CF-18s as the politics of replacing them with the F-35 or something else keeps delaying any decision. The old government pushed the decision past the election, hoping to make the call when the political risks were low. The new government will probably make a decision but only after the process gets extended. The army has had insufficient resources to train and exercise as the result of declining budgets and escalating costs in other areas. On his way out to retirement, [Army Chief Lieutenant-General Pete Devlin was quite open](#) about the risk of developing a hollow army due to cuts in the operation budget. Simply put, the CAF face many challenges in the world with aging equipment and inadequate budgets.

If the new government were to reduce Canada's ambition in the world, then the various tradeoffs would be easier to address. Indeed, one expert on Canadian defence, David Perry, has used the phrase "less with less."¹ The Defence Review Consultation Paper suggests that there may be some room to discuss changes in the missions of the CAF. However, the mandate letters that serve as the basis for the review, in the absence of a wider national security review, make it clear that the new government is widening the scope of potential CAF operations. In addition to the previous government's requirements of being able to defend Canada, participate in the joint defence of North America and contribute to NATO, the Liberals also want to increase Canada's involvement in peacekeeping operations. Given how stretched the CAF already are, how can the Liberals add a new mission or expand a relatively marginalized mission?



One fear is that the government might be underestimating the demands of peacekeeping in the 21st century. It is certainly the case that Canada participated less and less in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping as it increased its role in various NATO efforts, including peacekeeping in the Balkans. This means that recent and new governments may have missed the changes in UN peacekeeping – more robust mandates and, alas, far more combat. Indeed, the old UN missions had more combat than publically understood, as this picture of a Canadian war memorial testifies. Having learned the lessons of Rwanda and of Bosnia, the UN efforts now require significantly more readiness as the opponents of peace also learned lessons from 1990s missions in Somalia, Rwanda and elsewhere. One of these lessons is to shoot at the peacekeepers, hoping that they will be pulled out. So, peacekeeping is not that ‘soft’ and still requires significant military effort.



Calgary War Museum, author's photo

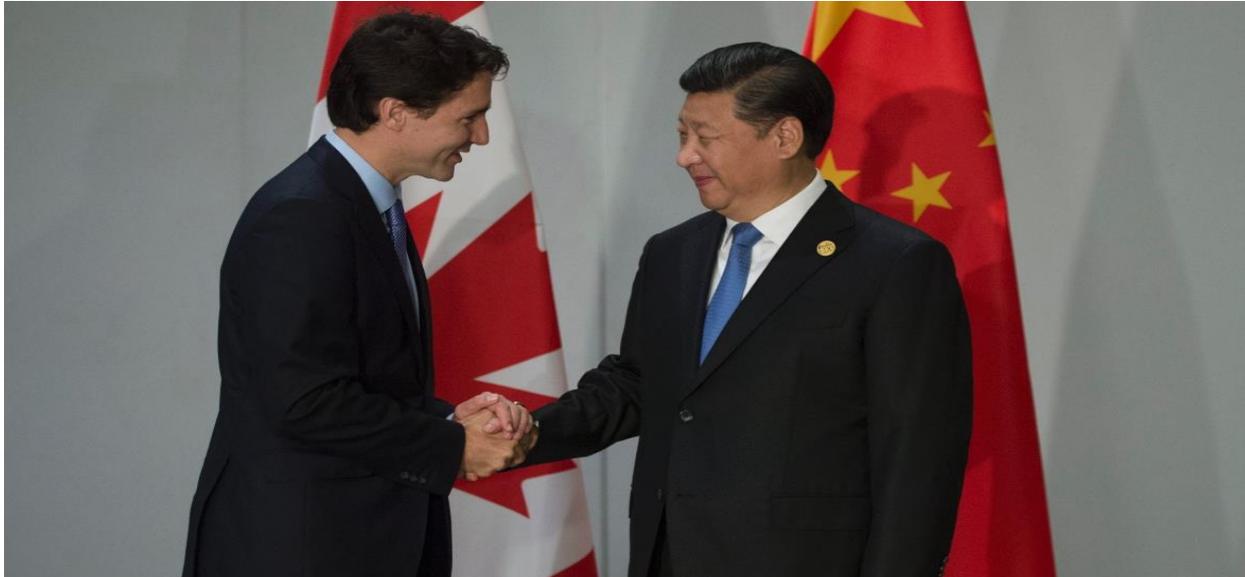
A different way to finesse expansive ambition with a constrained military is to hope that ‘soft’ power in general can be deployed instead of ‘hard’ power. The idea is that a more engaged Global Affairs Canada means less of a need to deploy the Canadian Armed Forces. The argument might go something like this: if we can be more proactive in mediating disputes and resolving differences via diplomacy, there will be less of a need to send the military to fight. Unfortunately, this is a false dichotomy. Yes, the Harper government could have engaged in more diplomacy, and, yes, it is smart for the new Trudeau government to try to use Canada’s brand as a mediator and its good offices so that Canada can make a difference in the world, perhaps helping to resolve some conflicts. But, no, diplomacy is not a substitute for force. They are complements rather than alternatives – force works better with diplomacy and diplomacy works better with some coercive capacity behind it.

Moreover, the adversary gets to vote, and today’s challengers are quite willing to use force. Diplomacy with the Islamic State is not likely to lead to the degrading of the threat it poses. On the other hand, diplomacy between and among Canada’s allies may facilitate the use of force and help to build some kind of alternative government in Syria and pressure on the Iraq government to accommodate the Kurds and Sunnis. Likewise, Canadian diplomacy is unlikely to cause



Russia to reduce its assertiveness but the deployment of Canadian planes and soldiers to the Baltics is a form of diplomacy is unlikely to cause Russia to reduce its assertiveness but the deployment of Canadian planes and soldiers to the Baltics is a form of diplomacy – engaging allies and sending signals to the Russians that further aggression would have a price.

Perhaps the only important place Canadian diplomacy can be deployed without the CAF playing a role would be the Asia-Pacific region (which is almost entirely left out of the Defence Review Consultation Paper). Canada's military is simply too small to play a role in that large arena, but [Canada does have some ability to make a difference via diplomacy](#): by calling out China when it undermines the international order; and by supporting the fragile democracies in the region.



Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press

Given the need for diplomacy to be backed by some coercive capabilities and the reality that there are actors out there that need to be destroyed (the Islamic State) or deterred (Russia), there will continue to be a need for Canada to invest in hard power. This then leads us back to the difficult question: on what should defence dollars be spent given that Canada is unlikely to spend much more than it has been spending? The first realization that must be accepted is that Canada will have less stuff in the future. The price of equipment is escalating (especially with the requirement to buy kit built in Canada), so Canada will not buy as many planes as it did last time, and it will not buy as many ships. Accepting that reality is the first step in rational defence planning. The logical consequence is that the Department of National Defence (DND) should also start planning for a smaller military. The previous government focused on keeping the size of the force the same, which meant ignoring 47% of the budget. If we want the Canadian Armed Forces to be ready when needed, they need to practice via training and exercises. This costs money. So, facing this choice directly, Canada needs a well-trained but slightly smaller force far more than it needs a symbolically larger force that is underprepared.

As long as Canada remains in NATO and as long as Canada wants to contribute to international stability via some coalitions of the willing, such as the anti-Islamic State campaign, it will need some armed force. Sure, Canada has good fortune to be far from the world's troublespots and has a good relationship with its only neighbour. But if Canada wants to make a difference, then it will need to be able to back up its words and carry some of the load.



¹ Dave Perry, "DND Will be Doing Less with Less," *ipolitics*, 4 April 2012. This phrase is gaining consensus, see Thomas Juneau, "Canadian Forces Reality Check: Time to Do Less with Less," *The Globe and Mail*, 14 April 2016, available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/canadian-forces-reality-check-time-to-do-less-with-less/article29629512/>.

► **About the Author**

Stephen Saideman holds the Paterson Chair in International Affairs at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs and is a Fellow with the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. His most recent book is "Adapting in the Dust: Learning Lessons from Canada's War in Afghanistan".



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