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INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

# Canada's Special Forces

by D. Michael Day  
July, 2016



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by D. Michael Day

CGAI Fellow  
July, 2016

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Whether attributed correctly or not, it has often been claimed that British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan observed that the issue which worried him the most was quite simply 'events, dear boy, events.' Time has proven he was right to worry, and governments indeed continue to struggle to determine how best to react to 'events.' An appropriate and relevant response to current-day conflict, in whatever form, invariably requires speed as well as an adaptability to tailor the reaction and/or force to address an ever-fluid situation. The profile of that decision and the associated costs are all factors that governments must consider and carefully weigh. In a world that is almost wholly anarchic, confused and chaotic, and filled with belligerents possessed of asymmetric capabilities and world views, the places in which the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) will find themselves will continue to share the same characteristics as space – congested, competitive and contested. Robust and agile Special Forces provide tailorable, scalable and highly adaptive capabilities that are immediately responsive at a very modest cost and little profile. Most importantly these forces can be employed in pre-conflict avoidance, conflict itself or after fighting ends to perform a myriad of tasks that support ever-evolving government of Canada objectives.

As the Canadian government considers how to evolve its military to meet the challenges that will appear over the next 50 years, there is clearly one outstanding and inarguably irrefutable fact: we don't know what those future challenges will be. Using this Rumsfeldian multiple of unknowns, the traditionalists too often and too quickly pivot to the arguments supporting the retention of a general-purpose combat capability. Continuing this trend of self-perpetuation, the argument of a multi-purpose capability is too often immediately translated into force structure (people, equipment and infrastructure) questions which in turn often results in a military that looks, for the most part, frightening like the one Canada has had for decades. The necessity or utility of such capabilities can be debated but what is more evident than ever is that, despite their many strengths, these forces are neither readily adaptable nor immediately deployable. As the recent past indicates, and regardless of what future one might imagine, it is in filling this gap that Canada's Special Forces (CANSOF) play such a crucial role.

Over the years the Special Forces' capability has proven to be remarkably able to meet a wide range of demands. Focused on the centrality of its counter-terrorism response, it provides a world-class capability that is able to operate domestically coast to coast on land or at sea, including in a nuclear, biological, chemical, radiological (NBCR) environment. The core responsibility of any government is providing for the safety and security of Canadians including maintaining a capability to meet the potential threats here in Canada. Although an extreme example, perhaps it is worth pondering how Canada would respond to Mumbai-style or Nairobi-style attack.

So if improving Canada's Special Forces is a part of the Defence Policy Review solution, what are the specific steps needed to strengthen this capability?

First, recognizing and re-emphasizing that CANSOF's core strength is the people selected and trained to work in this field, the continued growth of the organization will lead to disproportionate outputs. This growth however must be carefully managed. A rush to demonstrate quick results will ultimately result in increased mission risk down the line. Commitment to growth must remain resolute, over years, but carefully constrained by the reality that the right men and women will take time to recruit, select and train.

*Ottawa Citizen*

Second, and although not a huge demand or draw in real terms on the capital budget, there needs to be enhanced investment to ensure that the CANSOF men and women who deploy either at home or away are supported with the technological edge that allows them to provide an disproportionate effect in any activity in which they are involved. Special Forces equip the operator, they don't focus on operating the equipment. The amount of capital expenditure is immaterial in comparison to the necessary fleet replacements of CANSOF's more conventional siblings, but remains critical nonetheless.

Third, CANSOF ties to the whole-of-government efforts must continue to be strengthened. The work in support of Global Affairs Canada's Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Program is a good example of how CANSOF can help multiply the effect for other government departments but it is not the only area. As Canada works to improve the integration and sharing of its intelligence and the work of its security agencies, CANSOF provides tremendous added value without the messiness of having jurisdictional complications. The fact that in this domain CANSOF can only work in support of these agencies ensures the transparency and control being implemented by the current government will cascade to all their activities when employed in such a role.

Finally, CANSOF's standalone position as an independent organization within the CAF and as a strategic tool for the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) and government of Canada needs to be retained. Previous discussions of subordinating CANSOF to either a conventional environment or other Joint Command must remain a thing of the past. The agility and adaptability of CANSOF is a direct product of the whole system, one which is based on a culture created over close to 25 years' existence and one which would be significantly degraded should it be considered for subordination to any other structure in the service. If subordination of CANSOF were to occur, the very attributes which make it the 'go to choice' for so many missions in so many places would be diluted at best or at worse diminished to the point of being nothing more than yet another conventional element. Nothing would be gained and much of the essence of CANSOF would be lost.

None of this argues against the maintenance of a relatively strong Canadian Army, Navy or Air Force. Their past, and recent operations, clearly indicate not just their utility but their world-class performances based on the abilities of young Canadian men and women. Notwithstanding our collective inability to predict the future, it is increasingly clear that instead of being the force of last resort, CANSOF has become the force of first choice. It should be manned, funded and positioned accordingly. Canada can, quite simply, not afford not to enhance this strategic capability: future events demand no less.



*Youtube*

## ► **About the Author**

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