



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **The Context of Canadian Defence Policy**

**by David J. Bercuson**  
**July 2018**

# POLICY UPDATE

---

## THE CONTEXT OF CANADIAN DEFENCE POLICY

by David J. Bercuson

CGAI Fellow  
July 2018



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
1800, 421 – 7th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 4K9  
[www.cgai.ca](http://www.cgai.ca)

©2018 Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
ISBN: 978-1-77397-026-4



The Canadian Armed Forces' first mission is the defence of Canada and its second mission is to do what it can to defend North America. The CAF's third traditional mission is to be deployed according to government dictates to out-of-Canada missions to aid allies – to participate in NATO missions or United Nations operations, or to engage in coalitions in missions such as the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai Peninsula.

Since the end of the Second World War, Canada's out-of-country missions have ranged from small UN contributions in obscure places to major NATO deployments in Europe, and wars in Korea (1950-1953) and Afghanistan (2001-2002, 2003-2014). In both Korea and Afghanistan, Canada responded to requests from major allies – especially the United States – to deploy troops as part of a major peace enforcement operation. In both Korea and Afghanistan, Canadians generally were strongly in favour of the missions at the start of operations, but public support faded as months and even years went by without indication that these missions had a clear and achievable objective. The government, responding to popular opinion, did not pull Canadians out of Korea until after the armistice of July 1953, but refused any sort of police role beyond 18 months after the ceasefire. In Afghanistan, the government pulled Canadian troops out of active operations in the summer of 2011 and assumed a training mission for a few years before leaving Afghanistan altogether, even though the fight still goes on.

Canadian casualties in both Korea and Afghanistan were very low compared to the casualty rate of the Second World War, but in the case of Afghanistan, the return of dead soldiers to Trenton, Ontario, and the transport of their bodies to Toronto, attracted huge public attention and no doubt undermined public support for the war.

No one can say whether Canada will soon contribute to more missions such as Korea or Afghanistan. In the latter case, the campaign consumed large resources of the Canadian defence establishment. To maintain a constant presence of some 2,000 to 2,600 troops in Kandahar province and Kabul for 10 years, immense resources in person power, kit, police and international aid focused Canadian defences on that mission. Kandahar was, in effect, a black hole, pulling in national defence resources from every part of Canada and from all three services. The nation would have to think twice before making any such commitment in the future. Either that, or greatly expand defence resources, which, despite promises made last year with the issuance of *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, is not likely to help much over the next decade.

What, then, is the likely future of Canadian military interventions abroad? The most likely options for Canada, other than the small peace support operation now going to Mali, is air attack, as in Iraq and Libya, or sea operations to support larger international or allied efforts, such as anti-piracy and anti-drug smuggling patrols. The problem here is that Canada's air force is obsolescent and will even become more so over the next decade as most of our allies, and the U.S. in particular, equip themselves with fifth-generation fighters. Meanwhile, we will continue to fly the CF-18s we currently have or the F-18s we will acquire from Australia. As for maritime operations, here too procurement problems will plague the navy for at least the next decade.



When it comes to the defence of Canada mission, similar problems prevail. Canada cannot be defended by the CAF alone and a formal attack on Canada or the United States is highly unlikely short of a major interstate war, which is in itself highly unlikely. Thus Canada's real role in the defence of itself and consequently the defence of the northern part of North America – the front door of the United States – is primarily one of reconnaissance. Canada must have or acquire the very best technologically advanced interceptor aircraft, surface ships and undersea capability to always know who is approaching our air, sea and undersea territory and usher them away. Yet we are not so equipped and in the case of submersibles, probably will never be. At the same time, Canada must collect as much information from unknown vehicles approaching our waters or airspace with interceptions of radar emissions, underwater sound pulses, etc., for intelligence purposes. And of course, Canada must share the results of its reconnaissance with our United States ally.

In the very unlikely event that an approach to Canada's territory is done with hostile intent to attack Canada or the United States, Canada must have as much capability as prudence would dictate to hold off the attack until the U.S.'s far more substantial forces can be brought to our aid.

But Canada is also one node in a global network of trade, transportation, migration, free navigation, and where formal or informal allies are concerned, defence obligations. Canada must be prepared to send military forces abroad when informal allies (such as Japan) and especially formal allies (as in NATO) seek our help.

Canadians often act as if Canada is a lone player in international affairs. But for reasons of trade alone (our large dependence on a rules-based international order), to ensure the safety and security of trade we must be ready to act with allies or informal allies such as Japan, Australia, the Gulf Cooperation Council, etc., to maintain order and security in the global commons. That means that given Canada's limited military ability, the nation must decide three issues: first, which parts of the globe are most important to Canadian interests; second, which parts of the defence spectrum should Canada endeavour to cover; third, to what degree should Canada engage militarily in areas where it has few, if any, national interests. Perhaps the question of what Canada's national interests are should be assessed as soon as possible in a global affairs policy review.

Much attention has been given to the question of whether Canada has the will or the ability to meet NATO's new target of two per cent of GDP on defence spending to which the previous government committed, and which the new government has agreed to "[move towards](#)". Certainly, for reasons of inadequate infrastructure alone, not to mention ongoing procurement problems that oblige governments to keep pushing back completion dates, it would be impossible to meet that standard any time soon. The military can only absorb limited amounts of additional funds as it is currently organized. But the fact is, the only nation that Canada must truly attempt to satisfy on matters of defence spending is the United States. And if Canada is prepared to get active and stay active in a high-profile manner in some area (geographical or in cyber-space) that is important to the United States, much pressure from the U.S. to meet the two per cent target will be mitigated as it was when Canada was engaged in Kandahar. A larger and more sustained effort



in the Caribbean might do the trick as a first Canadian priority that would also serve Canadian interests due to Canada's strong financial, mining and other commercial interests there and the growing number of Canadians with strong family ties to the Caribbean. This question is, of course, a matter of foreign policy priorities but the basic point is that the U.S. did not press Canada to increase defence spending when our men and women were being killed in Afghanistan.



*Figure 1: U.S. Army Lt. Col. Burton Shields, commander of the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, meets with U.S., British, and Canadian soldiers during Operation Helmand Spider in Badula Qulp, Helmand province, Afghanistan, Feb. 12, 2010. (Source: U.S. Army)*

Afghanistan is over for us, but we need to find some other compelling mission or missions that will show that our importance is not to be measured solely in how much we spend, but also by what we do. In the last two years, the government has committed itself not only to a peace operation in Mali but to a variety of exercises in land, sea and air in central Europe and the Baltic. Most important is the commitment to place 540 soldiers in Latvia and to lead a composite NATO brigade there. The Latvia mission is not unimportant since the NATO brigade constitutes a tripwire in the event that Russia moves against the Baltic countries. But the chances of a major Russian conventional attack in central Europe or even what is left of Ukraine are highly unlikely. For all the bravado from the U.S. Congress and from Russian President Vladimir Putin and his minions, major war is unthinkable, especially when there are now so many other ways, short of war, to attack nations deemed strongly opposed to your own national interests.





What was once called information war, propaganda or even espionage has now emerged as “hyper-war” or even “cyber-war” and constitutes a cheap and relatively riskless way of putting pressure on an opponent or of interfering in the efficient running of an opponent’s society. Why launch bomber attacks against the electric power grid of a major Western city, when computer hacking will do the job just as well? The only thing new about this new way of war is the technology; the intent has existed since the beginning of war itself. The question for Canada – having been a member of the Five Eyes signals intelligence community since the Second World War – is what are we willing to put into these new and highly complex operations? Do we have sufficient skilled people to deploy? Are we willing to shift from the defensive to the offensive (which was strongly implied in SSE)? Do we have the money and resources to put into this new way of waging war? Have Canadians been primed to understand what is at stake? Will we restrict our efforts to the Five Eyes community or should we press to expand that community by, for example, admitting Japan?

Actually, the most important aspect of Canadian defence policy that remains unstated is its political context. What are Canada’s goals and objectives in the world? What trade arrangements do we seek and with whom? We have no formal military ties to Australia, for example, but what strategic objectives would we like to see achieved in that region? With a small but deployable military, Canada has to pick its slots and declare to the world what we are prepared to do and where we are prepared to do it.

One of the more important debates we must have is how to deploy. In the days when our military was almost twice as large as it is today, Canada sent several missions overseas at the same time while also maintaining a strong (for us) presence in NATO. But spreading out our deployments to Somalia, Cyprus, the Sinai, the Persian Gulf, Haiti and other places gave us little political leverage anywhere. If we seek political leverage – and we should – one or two significant deployments on land, sea or air would increase it. After all, when we repeat the old mantra that our military defends Canada, defends North America and deploys on international missions to support allies or international organizations doing work we believe in, do we send our military out of country as a colony, or as a sovereign power expecting commensurate political say in how they are to be deployed, and political (if not also commercial, industrial or investment) opportunities in return?

Most of these questions of foreign policy and required defence capability should be relatively easy for Canada to answer. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s, former prime minister Pierre Trudeau fiddled with the notion of either neutrality for Canada or greatly decreased military resources. The world today has changed dramatically since then and now we are not only members of NORAD and NATO but of the Group of Seven as well. We count as strong allies not only the European Union, but Japan, the ANZAC countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The government must choose between retaining those self-imposed bits of neutrality that were adopted decades ago and creating an armed state that will stand up for itself and its allies in this era of growing great power competition.

## ► About the Author

---

**Dr. David J. Bercuson** is Director of the Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, Area Director, International Policy for the School of Public Policy, University of Calgary and Program Director and Fellow, Canadian Global Affairs Institute.

## ► Canadian Global Affairs Institute

---

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to, or collaborate with, the Institute.