

Stretched to the breaking point

ELINOR SLOAN

From Tuesday's National Post
June 17, 2008

The federal government's Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS) sparked significant confusion when it was released in May. Most of the strategy is not new. Defence Minister Peter MacKay noted that Canada has purchased strategic airlift and is in the process of buying tactical airlift, battlefield helicopters, main battle tanks, arctic offshore patrol vessels and joint support ships. The Minister also highlighted some new commitments, including ships to replace the navy's destroyers and frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, next-generation fighter aircraft and a family of land combat vehicles.

How much will all of this cost? Press accounts and government statements offer up a purchase price of about \$18-billion. To that one must add several billion dollars already committed for the purchasing of new army trucks and maritime helicopters and upgrading frigates and maritime patrol aircraft. Other critical projects include fixed-wing search-and-rescue aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles. In addition, shortfalls have already been identified in some project commitments, notably the joint support ship. Finally, and significantly, there is the cost of maintaining new equipment over a 20-year period, which conservatively adds about 50% to the overall cost. All of this amounts to roughly \$45-billion over the next 20 years.

At first glance the money available for capital acquisitions seems to correspond with the identified costs. But in fact, the Conservative government's long-term funding formula does not meet the Canadian Forces' needs. This is because most of the \$45-billion must come much sooner than later. Reduced investments in defence in the 1990s have led to a situation in which a whole range of major military platforms -- supply ships, destroyers, maritime patrol aircraft, fighters, battlefield helicopters, light armoured vehicles -- must be replaced within the same five-year window of about 2012-2017. The CF needs approximately \$30-billion for capital acquisitions over the next 5 years to begin the procurement process. After that, our Forces will need about \$15-billion over the period to 2028 to maintain the equipment.

And equipment is not the only issue. The government's commitment to a force level of 70,000 is at least 10,000 people short of what is necessary for the Forces to be able to do all that it is being asked to do. More immediately, it is imperative the government address the issue of how to actually increase the force size. Since 2005 the army has actually decreased in size, despite a large and continuous commitment to Afghanistan, and despite needing to find forces to fill newly created units and command structures. A recent assessment reveals the army "is now stretched almost to the breaking point." The lack of crew availability is also impacting the air force's ability to carry out its commitments, and the navy has the equivalent of a full ship's company of vacant positions on each coast. Because recruiting takes time, part of the answer here may lie in increasing retention through financial incentives.

Today, Canada's military has a level of public support that has not been seen in decades. Canadians recognize the good work of the Forces and see defence as a necessary expenditure. The defence reductions of the 1990s set the stage for a perfect storm of existing shortfalls in personnel and looming gaps in equipment. The government should seize, not squander, the opportunity to make the necessary investments. - Elinor Sloan is a senior research fellow with CDFAI and an associate professor of international relations at Carleton University. A longer version of Prof. Sloan's analysis is available at www.cdfai.org.