

# Sustaining our armed forces after leaving Afghanistan

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Once more, the Canadian government faces financial challenges. As Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in his Boxing Day interview with CTV news, the path to the black will involve a new era of "fiscal discipline". Get ready, he warned us, for five frugal years in terms of government spending.

The squeeze on government budgets obliges prioritization. The lesson of "getting government right" in the Chretien/Martin years meant that only the allocations for health care and First Nations remained relatively unscathed.

Health care continues to be the elephant in the room, especially the retiring boomers put more strain on the system that is already facing demands for pharmacare, electronic medical records and a national child care initiative. Then there is education and teachers are a formidable lobby group. Nor can we forget the environment -- the green lobby, made more indignant by the failure of Copenhagen. And the pressures of minority government further complicate the context for decision-making.

In terms of positioning, the Canadian Armed Forces go into the budget battles better situated than they were in the early 1990s when capacity was hollowed out. Canadians have connected to their Armed Forces. The Forces are arguably our most popular public institution with a highly visible presence through their work at home -- ice storms, floods, Oka and overseas -- most notably Afghanistan. Perhaps the greatest asset of the Forces is their appeal to service and, as the DND commercials put it -- "to fight fear, to fight chaos, to fight distress."

Yet the Forces have already become a target for budget cuts.

In a recent report, the left-leaning Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) argues that military spending in Canada is disproportionately high -- 10 per cent of government spending -- and that it sucks up money that could be used for other government programs, such as environmental spending or foreign aid. They point to spending within NATO and argue that we now spend slightly more than the average. They omit the fact that the U.S., with a population 10 times that of Canada, spends 25 times as much as we do.

Nor do they acknowledge that we are obliged to provide security across five-and-a-half time zones and that with the second largest land mass in the world, threats from space, the air and sea will have a disproportionate impact on Canada. Would we rather have the Americans do it for us? Serious countries invest in their defence and deterrent capacities. Collective security as well as peacekeeping, also requires us to pull our weight.

The CPA proclaims that "the money that is spent on such missions could be used far more effectively in development assistance and other humanitarian aid in other parts of the world." The authors are not alone in missing the obvious, as is illustrated in Tim Goddard's poignant eulogy to his daughter, the late Captain Nichola Goddard. Father and daughter were arguing over Michael Ignatieff's contention in his book, *Empire Lite*, that military force is required to permit the reconstruction of civil society. When professor Goddard argued that education was the key to development, Capt. Goddard replied: "You can't do that when the bad guys run things, Dad, they just shoot you. You have to have peace and good government in order for the rest to happen. I do what I do so you can do what you do."

Afghanistan has taught us many lessons including the reality that in failing states development and diplomacy depend on security and hard power. Our Forces are remarkably versatile -- we earned a reputation as shock troops in the First World War and then peacekeepers in the Cold War era. Today our Forces use their skills to create the conditions that allow diplomats to negotiate a durable peace and our development program can build schools and hospitals and train teachers and nurses. But we need to recognize that, notwithstanding our best efforts, success ultimately depends on the people and their leaders to whom we lend a helping hand.

We're back to the future in explaining what the Canadian Forces are about. The rediscovery of our military heritage was overdue -- we may not be a warlike nation but, when required, we are a nation of warriors with a long and proud history that is finding a new appreciation in places like the splendidly renovated Museums of the Military in Calgary.

Reaching out to Canadians is important. We need to understand how our Forces serve the Canadian interest in defending Canada, as an effective partner in continental defence and as a responsible ally with a capability to lead internationally, in part because of our interoperability with our American neighbour.

The developments in the North are a parable for what is taking place around the world. The maritime estate on which we claim jurisdiction is about 70 per cent of our land mass. The changes in the ocean's regulatory regime have changed more in the last 30 years as coastal states extend their jurisdiction than in the last three centuries. The oceans carry 90 per cent of global traffic including an estimated 40 per cent of Canadian trade. Our sovereignty and prosperity depends on surveillance and security so that we know what is happening on our land and seas and overhead in our skies.

Preserving the versatility necessary for our Armed Forces requires leadership and sustained commitment. It will make demands on our financial resources. Are we prepared to make that commitment?

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