

Government should embrace concept of strategic army reserve

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In 1927, Senator Raoul Dandurand boasted that Canadians lived in a “fireproof house,” while in March 1939 Prime Minister Mackenzie King asserted that “the days of great expeditionary forces... crossing the oceans are not likely to recur.”

The British, for much of the same period, based their defence estimates on the assumption that there would be no big war for ten years. In a variation of these themes, the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence recently accepted testimony that “big war is highly unlikely.” In a December 2011 report entitled “Answering the Call”, the Committee concluded that as “21st century warfare will not require mass mobilization,” the “Army Reserve’s designated role as the main recruiting base for mass mobilization” should be eliminated. This recommendation was made despite the Committee’s admission that “there is no way to predict the size and scope of future missions abroad.”

The Committee’s rejection of strategic “mass mobilization” in favour of the Afghan “operational” model recommended by a naval Vice Chief of the Defence Staff presents a false dichotomy and a “one size fits all” approach to reserves. Navies and air forces, which plan to fight with the equipment they have as “forces-in being,” have never viewed reserves in the same light as armies and prefer to keep them small for immediate augmentation. The Afghan “operational” model is, in fact, the “forces-in-being” model.

Unlike the army reserve, the naval reserve has sailors paid as regulars permanently operating coastal vessels alongside the regular fleet. The air force reserve with a large complement of former regular pilots likewise participates in operational training as part of the team.

The army approach to having a reserve, however, is much more personnel intensive and aims at the strategic deployment of main contingent manpower to sustain smaller regular forces committed to action. Indeed, reliance on reserves underpinned the rationale for mobilization, which recognized that large regular armies could not be financially sustained in peacetime. The solution was to retain a smaller regular army that could be expanded in a crisis through a mobilization plan drawing on reserves and recruiting. Flexible categories such as partial and selective mobilization additionally came to characterize the concept ever since mass mobilization timetables contributed to the start of World War I.

The Committee further observed that reliance on citizen soldiers during the Afghanistan mission confirmed that the Canadian Army could not function without them. The reason that reserves were needed, of course, was because the army could not muster sufficient regulars to maintain one relatively small task force in the field. Had there been enough regulars to do so, it is highly unlikely that reserves would ever have been called out.

In short, Canada’s regular army is currently too small to carry out assigned domestic and overseas tasks. Not to have any mobilization capability to expand it in time of crisis or emergency would thus be strategic folly. Indeed, this was well recognized by the same Senate committee as far back as December 2004, when Senator Colin Kenny expressed shock at the testimony of Vice Admiral R. D. Buck that the size of the Canadian Forces could not be increased by 5000 regulars and 3000 reserves in under five years owing to a shortage of inadequate training infrastructure. At this pace Canada would have missed World War II.

The Committee, nonetheless, affirmed that “citizen soldiers” have become indispensable to Canadian Forces operations and recommended increasing reserve size and strength, enhancing the number of reserve training days, and making reserve pay “stable, predictable, non-discretionary and protected, with its own funding line.”

As nothing substantial has yet been done to protect reserve pay since it was cut without warning in 2009, it remains to be seen whether this recommendation will be implemented. The history of increasing army reserve strength has also been marked by foot-dragging. The current government must now recognize that regular forces are too small to achieve its domestic and international goals and embrace the concept of a strategic reserve as the only affordable option.

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