

Military is banking on tanks

Canada is set to receive dozens of new tanks, and they're bigger and mightier than before. Canadian Forces thinking is now far from Hillier's vision of transformation.

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Only history will tell if retired former chief of defence staff Gen. Rick Hillier's criticism of the voluminous National Defence and the Canadian Forces' Report on Transformation 2011 is valid.

Hillier claims the report's recommendations, authored by retired Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, would destroy the Canadian military if acted upon. The report recommended, among other things, saving \$1 billion annually by reorganizing the Forces and cutting 11,000 headquarters command and control jobs.

But, as brilliant as Hillier was at building the Forces' morale and public image as CDS from 2005 to 2008, he has been stunningly wrong before. One only has to revisit an article he authored in 2003 during his early thinking on army transformation when he argued that Canada's aging Leopard tanks should be replaced with the United States Stryker Mobile Gun System.

Then chief of the land staff, he wrote: "The strong qualities of a Leopard parked in Valcartier and Edmonton are useless to the soldiers in Kabul, Eritrea, Bosnia or anywhere else we need direct fire. In some cases, we can't get it there since it is too heavy for the C-130 to lift, in other places (such as the streets of Kabul), it cannot manoeuvre and in other situations (e.g., on peace support operations), it would be destabilizing to deploy or employ it."

Fast forward to 2006, and 15 of those very same 30-year-old Leopards from CFB Edmonton that Hillier had disparaged as "millstones" around the neck of Canada's military thinking were taking up positions in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. Later, Canada borrowed 20 Leopard 2A6Ms from Germany, also for use in Afghanistan in place of the aging and under-armoured Leopards.

Not to be too critical of Hillier, the nature of the battle changed in Afghanistan because the government decided to move the military's operations from Kabul to Kandahar. Had the Forces actually acquired the much lighter-armoured Strykers, there is no telling what the consequences could have been.

Clearly, the Canadian Forces thinking has moved very, very far from Hillier's vision of transformation. Rather than the asymmetric threats he envisioned almost exclusively from failed and failing states, the Leslie report is far more general, stating that: "The future cannot be predicted but there is fair certainty in knowing that future operations will be challenging, will be plentiful, will run concurrently and will cover the full spectrum of military capabilities at home and abroad."

While that may not seem to be a striking departure from Hillier's thinking, what is an astonishing departure is the size and scope of the modern tank acquisition program the Canadian Forces has embarked upon.

The Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) at CFB Edmonton expected to take delivery of 14 Leopard 2A4Ms in February 2012, followed by another 68 in three different variants to various units in Canada in batches through to 2014. By 2013, it is anticipated that Canada will have three 19-tank squadrons.

Each squadron will have three headquarters tanks and four troops of four tanks each. Two of the squadrons will be with the Strathcona's, and one will be located in Gaagetown, manned by troops from the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the 12e Regiment Blindé du Canada.

The Armour School will have about 16 training tanks. CFB Borden will receive three. As well, 1 Combat Engineer Regiment in Edmonton will have between nine and 13 Leopard-based Armoured Engineer Vehicles and 4 Engineer Support Regiment in Gagetown will have four AEVs.

Compared to the 42.5-tonne Leopards the Strathcona's first took to Afghanistan, the new Leopard variants are monsters. The 20 Leopard 2A6Ms coming from Germany weigh a hefty 63 tonnes with mine protection enhancements. The 20 Leopard 24As and 20 Leopard 2A4Ms all coming from the Netherlands weigh 56 tonnes and 62.5 tonnes, respectively. All have significantly more firepower punch with 120-millimetre main guns compared to the 1970s Leopards' 105-millimetre gun.

Millstones around the neck of army thinking? Hardly. Tanks Hillier once scorned are one of the cornerstones of the Canadian military's transformation. Only time will tell if he is right or wrong about the rest.

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