

CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

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by Fabrice Blais-Savoie

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BRIEFING NOTE

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The NATO mission in Latvia was recently upgraded from a battlegroup to a brigade. This has prompted Canada, as the framework nation, to rethink its logistics operations, especially within the multinational NATO context.

The role of a framework nation is not very well defined by NATO. It is responsible for acting as the face of the mission in the country, it interacts with the government and the people. The nation acts as the point-person for the mission, it manages the other nations present, it ensures their presence, that their commitments are respected, and that everything is working cohesively.

Despite the missions evolving from a battlegroup to a brigade, the Canadian structure has not changed much. Especially with the increase size, there is a lack of clarity on who is making decisions and on oversight. As a temporary fix to alleviate this, decision making has been moved to weekly high-level committees who then delegate, helping to keep the direction consistent despite the size of the deployment and the limited structure.

At the same time, Canada has begun reengineering its supply chain back-end. One of the biggest changes was moving all of the “third line” warehousing and distribution, from Joint Operations (at the operational level) to Joint Logistics (at the strategic level). This change also involved delegating the co-chairship of the supply chain committee from the Director of Staff of the Strategic Joint Staff to the Chief of Joint Logistics. This was necessary as the former was too busy with the daily operations of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to allocate time to this planning. Theres also been some longer-scope changes to how the CAF thinks about preparing logisticians. The training center, which used to be under the Chief of Military Personnel, now also reports to the Chief of Joint Logistics. These changes all aim to align the organization both horizontally and vertically. These changes are described in more detail in the recently released Joint Logistics Modernization Campaign Plan and in the previously released Operational Sustainment Modernization Strategy.

These structural changes are accompanied by a rethinking of supply chain approaches. In recent history, operations, such as Latvia, have been managed at the administrative level. In practice that means that the Department of Defence would talk with NATO and with the EU to arrange supply. This works in peacetime, but in wartime it creates serious delays and gaps in the ability of the CAF to supply its own frontline. This problem is more than strategic, it is also operational. The CAF currently relies on contract capability for shipping and ad-hoc resupply missions. In the case of a peer-to-peer conflict, a more comprehensive supply chain is required to ensure it can sustain capabilities. Examples of the peacetime mindset are that if ships have to reload during a mission, they come back

to Canada, if equipment has to be repaired, it has to be airlifted back to Canada. The CAF is working on this issue – a recent exercise practiced Canadian ships reloading in Australia, but there's no assigned capacity to this; it requires reallocating personnel.

At the logistical scale, these issues can be seen with the Latvia case. The simplest maritime route is a direct path between the ports of Montreal and Riga. This solution works for peacetimes but poses some challenges for wartime: the port of Montreal is extremely busy for civil shipping, leading to congestion. Furthermore a worker strike or a blockage in the St-Lawrence River would freeze military resupplies. These ports are also relatively vulnerable to attacks which could shut down the route before any engagement. The allay this, the CAF is working on developing a more integrated military supply route to Eastern Europe in partnership with Sweden and other Nordic allies**.**

Beyond national challenges, discussions are ongoing to ensure supply chain interoperability. NATO allies agree that a war cannot be fought with 32 supply chains but, while goods like food and fuel are relatively easy to centralize, Ukraine has shown that despite years of interoperability efforts, not all ammunition is interoperable. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that both Five Eyes and NATO logistics experts agree that a peer-to-peer war cannot be won with stockpiles. There is a pressing need to think about production chains from a defence perspective and consider how the military can send the right signal to manufacturer. There is also a need to shift away from "just in time" production to "just in case" production. More details on will be released in the Defence Industrial Strategy – focusing on the private sector – and in the Supply Chain Resilience Strategy – focusing on stock and allocation.

In conclusion, the CAF remains very capable, it has particularly well-trained soldiers and solid equipment, despite some of its age. However, its supply chain is quite shaky, with outdated tracking tools and methods for its force and equipment. This is exemplified in the Canadian Forces Movement Control Unit, staffed by only 40 people. It works in peacetime but would be completely unable of managing the mass movement of personnel and equipment required in a peer-to-peer war.

About the Author

Fabrice Blais-Savoie *is a student at the Balsillie School of International Affairs' Master of Public Policy. He holds a bachelor's degree in international studies and political science from Bishop's University.*

He has extensive professional experience in policy making and international relations within the Quebec government, working as both an international affairs advisor for the Ministry of Higher Education and an international trade policy advisor for the Ministry of Economy, Innovation and Energy.

His research focuses on the intersection of trade, security, and emerging technologies. He presented at the 2023 Canadian Undergraduate Security Conference on the semiconductor supply chain and organized the 2024 edition of the conference. He is an emerging scholar with the RAS/NSA in which he published a policy brief on Canada's technology advantage in achieving the NATO 2% target.

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