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by Wesley Wark

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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The April 2022 budget promised some modest increases in defence spending over the next five years. Some action on defence expenditures was inevitable given the Ukraine war, especially the rapid depletion of our defence inventory of weapons to send to Ukraine's aid. There was also pressure on Canada to up its game in NATO, and the need to get cracking on NORAD modernization. While defence issues feature prominently in Chapter 5 of the budget, there is no sign that Canada will be able to meet a NATO target of two per cent expenditure of GDP any time soon, and to get cracking on NORAD modernization seems to involve more study of options to fulfil this commitment. The requirements for NORAD modernization are clear, including new space-based platforms for surveillance and intelligence, and command and control, but the price tag is daunting and that weakens political will. This is a system whose original architecture in the DEW line chain of radar stations dates to the 1950s. The DEW line was partially modernized and rebranded as the North Warning System in the mid-1980s.

The most concrete defence proposals in the budget include a further commitment of $500 million in the current fiscal year to provide military aid to Ukraine. The government has followed a U.S. lead and recently announced that it would supply heavy artillery to Ukraine, likely to be drawn from existing CAF stocks. For the rest of the promised armaments support, Canada will have to go shopping on the open market, which will be time-consuming. Or, it will have to use the money to assist Eastern European NATO partners to provide armaments to Ukraine out of their inventories of Soviet-era weapons familiar to the Ukrainian defence forces. Hopefully, there will be money for the ongoing provision of satellite imagery for Ukraine, a vital intelligence tool for the hard-pressed Ukrainian military and a key element of war crimes investigations. The initial $1 million promised by the Canadian government for Ukraine to purchase commercial satellite imagery had no specific upgrade in the budget, but $1 million does not buy a lot of pictures from space or expert assessment of them. The Communications Security Establishment gets a substantial chunk of money ($875 million) to enhance its cyber offensive and defensive capabilities. Some of that capability could also be deployed in assistance to Ukraine to help it ward off Russian cyber-threats. Sadly, there appears to be no special funding package for the announced plan to conduct war crimes investigations within Canada, drawing on Ukrainian refugees, and to assist the International Criminal Court in The Hague with its investigations. Military lawyers in the DND's Office of the Judge Advocate General (JAG) could make an important contribution here.

The most puzzling proposal in the budget concerns a defence policy review. This is couched as an update of the 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, which is less than five years old and was designed to contemplate defence needs over a 20-year horizon. The argument is that a review of equipment and technology for the Canadian Armed Forces is needed "in a world that has fundamentally changed in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine." The extent to which the world has fundamentally changed is debatable; certainly, the sense of the menace posed by Vladimir Putin's Russia has been vastly heightened, but maybe that should have seized us long ago. The real news is that the government, at least for so long as the Ukraine crisis persists, is more willing to speed up the repair of Canada's debilitated military.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland promised a "swift review." The concept of a swift review is an oxymoron, not because the Department of Defence is incapable of swift action, but more because a real review cannot be swift if it is going to be serious, substantive and willing to address new perspectives on Canada's defence needs. The concept of a swift review virtually rules out external stakeholder engagement and public input. A swift review is really just a confirmatory review – and who needs that?

There is a deeper problem still. This resides in the embedded tendency in Ottawa to conduct siloed, department-specific reviews that fail to capture the larger strategic picture and the need for whole-of-government responses. What good is a defence review in the absence of complementary thinking about Canada's national security needs and foreign policy objectives? The self-evident answer is – none. The military is but one subordinate instrument of power in a wider calculus involving national security threats and responses and international security outlooks. It is now 18 years since Canada produced a national security policy – the 2004 statement "Securing an Open Society." This was the first national security strategy ever formulated and so far, it is the last. Nor have we updated our foreign policy. The last foreign policy white paper was published in 2005; one would have to look even further back to the period between 1968 and 1970 for substantive thinking on foreign policy challenges for Canada.

The real need is not for a rehashed defence review but a holistic security review, similar to that published by the U.K. in 2021, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age," which bundled together security, defence, development and foreign policy. A Canadian version would ask important questions about the range of security threats that Canada faces and the part that the military needs to play in meeting them.

Geopolitical fracture revealed by the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine clearly drives the idea of a defence policy review update. The unprovoked Russian attack raises important questions around the need to enhance Canada's military posture in Europe, at a time when many front-line NATO partners, from the Baltics to southeastern Europe, are increasingly calling into question the current NATO trip-wire posture of minimal forward-deployed forces. The Canadian government may need to consider a return to having combat-ready forces, especially army and air, permanently deployed in Europe. During much of the Cold War, we had a sizable military presence in Germany. This time around, we may need to consider a permanent presence in the Baltics, based on our experience of providing military assistance to Latvia (Operation Reassurance), even if that would nullify previous agreements reached with the Russian government. Our current augmented deployment to Latvia totals around 1,200 military personnel. This compares to fewer than two standard Russian brigade tactical groups (BTG). Russia was estimated to have deployed some 120 BTGs in the Ukraine invasion.

If the question of a future CAF role in Europe is not thorny enough, let's consider other threats that are upon us, including pandemics, climate change impacts and extremist elements that raised their heads during the trucker convoy protest of early 2022. None were factored into the 2017 defence review. Responses to each of these threats demonstrate the complex intertwining of the military instrument with other dimensions of security.

The Canadian military was called to assist the public health response in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of deployments to long-term care facilities in Quebec and Ontario, in the face of dire circumstances. The military also supported remote communities in the North and provided logistic help to the Public Health Agency of Canada for the distribution of PPE from the national emergency strategic stockpile system. While there has been less call on the military following vaccine roll-out, and during subsequent waves of COVID-19, this experience may offer an important playbook for the future. While civil assistance missions were underway (Operation Laser), the CAF also had to take care of its own personnel deployed at home and abroad, and plan rapid evacuations of Canadians from the epicentre of the COVID outbreak in Wuhan and from infected cruise ships. DND candidly notes that Canadian Forces Health Services (CFHS) has been badly overstretched by responses to the pandemic, with its capacity reduced to 60 per cent: "The health of the CAF is predicated on the health of CFHS, and both need to be reconstituted." Threat assessments on the dangers posed by COVID-19 produced by the Canadian Forces Intelligence Command (CFINTCOM) demonstrated a poorly resourced military intelligence capacity, ill-equipped to understand and monitor a global pandemic. Another troubling dimension of the CAF's response to the pandemic was an opportunistic exercise in information operations (IO) targeting the Canadian population, based on wildly exaggerated notions of how Canadian society would respond to the pandemic. The IO plan, fortunately, was mostly stopped in its tracks before it could be implemented. All of this suggests that any defence review must lean forward to consider the military's future roles in the next pandemic.

Future-oriented thinking is also needed when it comes to considering the military's role in response to climate security threats. The tempo of military operations in Canada to assist with recovery following a climate change-induced emergency is growing and will increase still further. In 2021 alone, CAF regular and reserve personnel were called out, under Operation Lentus, to respond to flooding in Yukon, British Columbia and Newfoundland and to help fight wildfires in northwestern Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia.

Thinking is slowly pivoting towards an understanding of climate change as a national security threat with the military as one element of response. Impacts have been identified as including economic threats, Arctic security, humanitarian crises abroad and even the possibility of destabilizing domestic threats at home. One signal of a change in thinking is the government's decision to propose the establishment in Canada of a NATO centre of excellence on climate change and security.

Three key questions emerge for the military in the face of climate security dangers. One concerns capabilities and resources to respond to domestic emergencies, assuming this continues to be a major mission for the CAF and a second involves the priority to be given to disaster relief missions globally, including through an enhanced role for the military-civil Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART). A third issue involves early warning capacity and the extent to which the CAF should capitalize on the CFINTCOM to provide greater insights, integrated with other government-wide expertise, on the security-related impacts of climate change at home and abroad. All these issues would be central to a genuine defence review.

The experience of the so-called trucker convoy protest movement in early 2022 has forced a reckoning with the question of the dangers posed by extremist violence moved by right wing, white supremacist and populist ideologies. The early failures of policing in dealing with the disruptive occupation of downtown Ottawa and blockades of critical border infrastructure led the federal government to briefly invoke the *Emergencies Act*, for the first time in its history. At the same time, the prime minister was adamant that he would not call out the military to respond to threats to public order in co-operation with police forces. But while we can hope, we cannot assume that future public order emergencies won't require military assistance. At the very least, DND must plan for a future role and consider the capabilities that would be required. The flip side, of course, is the question of the extent to which the military itself is fire-proof from extremist elements. This is an important component of a larger question about cultural change in the military as it copes with deeply embedded problems of sexism and as it attempts to advance a diversity and inclusion agenda to make the military more representative of the society it serves.

Sadly, a swift defence review, possibly unloved even within the DND, will accomplish little of the broad-scope thinking about Canada's security needs that is required in a new age of threats.

About the Author

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Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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