

Combat Capability and the Canadian Forces:

Where Are We Now?

(And in the Foreseeable Future)

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by

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Introduction

When I set out to pen some thoughts on this subject in late November 2001, against the backdrop of the so-called War Against Terrorism, it was with some trepidation. The daily-changing panoply of events has led to the ritual humbling of media and academic pundits who had predicted precisely the opposite of what has transpired. If one cannot forecast with any certainty what the Americans will be up to next week, why even bother for the Canadian Forces?

Predicting the future can be a mug's game unless you have an honest assessment of the past, and can relate it equally honestly to the present. Indeed, some long-term trends already are crystallizing. In this presentation, the identification of consistencies – or any anomalies – with the past and present experience will serve as the basis for discussion of those capabilities that should merit attention for future development.

Main Text

As the co-author of the official history of the Gulf War of 1990-1991, I have attempted elsewhere to define a “Canadian way of war” in light of that experience. Nothing in the present operations against Afghanistan mitigates against the overall pattern except in detail. In essence, the Canadian preference in peacetime has been to be suspicious of large standing forces. Three times in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – in 1914, in 1939, and in 1950 – Canada was caught unprepared for the outbreak of global war, only to prove capable of mobilizing forces that distinguished themselves in action and out of proportion to the nation's size. That Canada chose to maintain a professional permanent force through the Cold War was due as much to the

continuing nature of the Soviet threat as to the newfound status as a middle power of some influence in the United Nations and NATO. But after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the normal peacetime inclination returned. The professional core of the forces was maintained only to the level required to satisfy our allies, and the national penchant for peacekeeping (originally an outgrowth of the middle power principle of functionalism) was not sufficient to stem the tide, and indeed became an end in itself. The Hot Peace that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union has served to confirm that military “capability” has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions: it is the commitment of capable formations large enough to warrant an independent command (that is, an army brigade, an air wing, or a naval task group) that qualifies Canada for effective representation on allied councils (witness the lack of representation on the Former Republic of Yugoslavia Contact Group).

None of the foregoing should be new to this audience, but there are three additional points that tend to be overlooked. Firstly, while overseas military contributions tend to be defined in terms of the Army, the Navy has been the first to be deployed upon the outbreak of war, and the role of the Air Force has grown commensurate with the precision of aerial bombardment and the degree of the manned bomber threat against North America. Secondly, because the border with the United States is undefended and there has never been a credible conventional threat against the North American homeland, Canadian military operations by definition are expeditionary; as such, as our moderator Dr Sokolsky has argued, they require only the commitment of the country’s disposable military force, commensurate with the perceived threat, and Canada can afford to be selective in the application of military force. Finally, with only one exception, Canadian naval, land and air forces have not had to operate in battle jointly as an independent force, at either the operational or the tactical level (the experience instead has been to combine effectively with allied forces) – the one exception was the RCN-RCAF Combined HQ in Halifax, established in 1943 to command the Canadian Northwest Atlantic theatre in the Second World War.

It still is unclear as to how long the immediate crisis in Afghanistan will last, what its final resolution might be, and where the Americans will direct their attention next. But it is not too early to assess the Canadian response in comparison with the traditional experience. Once again, the Navy was the first to deploy, and did so in sufficient strength to warrant an independent task group commander. Some observers have quibbled that there is little point to a naval contribution against a land-locked opponent, but they overlook two factors: the developing American understanding of littoral warfare (by their definition, encompassing up to 1000 kilometres inland), and that Canadian naval units can integrate seamlessly in USN carrier battle groups and amphibious ready groups, from which a large portion of the war has been prosecuted. Indeed, without any secure local bases from which to operate, even the US Army and Air Force have been restricted until only very recently to the very particular operations of long-range bombing and Special Forces. Since the CF possesses neither of those specialized and very expensive capabilities, it was a godsend that a capable navy exists to make a meaningful initial contribution.

Still, in the final analysis, a nation’s contribution always will be remembered – and measured – by its contributions of fighting troops on the ground. As such, the decision not to become involved with the UN operation in Kabul, and instead to dispatch the 750-man PPCLI /

LdSH(RC) Battalion Group to join with the US Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division as a "stabilization force", is entirely appropriate. It provides the Army an opportunity to practice the interoperability concepts with which the Navy and Air Force have been familiar for over a half-century. Nonetheless, an argument still can be made that anything less than brigade-strength is a squandering of national military and diplomatic treasure.

In the longer paper, and the summary of it reproduced in the latest issue of On Track, I discussed a number of strategic considerations that also tend to be overlooked in official promulgations and even most analytical critiques of Canadian defence policy. In the interests of time, I just want to highlight a couple of those points.

First, most critiques spring from the premise that a gap exists between the operations to which the Canadian Forces are committed and their capability to undertake and sustain them. That commitment-capability gap generally is considered to be a problem of funding. I put to you instead that it is a credibility gap. The root of the problem, perhaps, has been the failure to address in a Canadian context the fundamental question posed by Samuel Huntington of any military: "What function do you perform which obligates society to assume responsibility for your maintenance?" Only after having answered that question clearly and succinctly can any attempt rationally be made to develop and implement a procurement policy and then to employ the resulting forces.

Second, implicit in all official and analytical works on Canadian defence policy is the notion that there is a national strategy. But if one does exist, nowhere has it ever been articulated. As Dr Sokolsky indicated in introducing me, I was a collaborator in writing Leadmark: The Navy's Strategy for 2020. In it, we bridged this credibility gap by developing a strategic framework to explain why Canada sends its forces abroad. In essence, we conducted some trend analysis to deduce that ours is not an inward-looking nation, and with our territorial boundaries safe from direct conventional military assault, Canada is made more secure by seeing to the resolution of global problems at their source, before they can expand to threaten the Canadian heartland. The tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> only throws the matter into sharper relief. Suddenly, the terms "homeland defence" and "forward security" can be spoken openly. Now, more than ever, Canadian security can only be ensured through a judicious combination of the two.

We answered Huntington's question in the naval context with a further analysis that the foreign and security policies of past, present and future Canadian governments require a Medium Global Force Projection Navy. In a "typology of navies" developed in Leadmark, on a descending scale of 1 through 9, this equated to a Rank 3 force, coming below those of the United States (in Rank 1) and Britain and France (in Rank 2), but equal to our Australian and Dutch allies. It gets a little more complicated when throwing air and land forces into the mix, but I submit for the purpose of discussion that this can be extrapolated to the Canadian Forces as a whole. Taken in combination with the notional Canadian Way of War, these strategic considerations lead to the conclusion that Canadian Armed Forces exist, fundamentally, for two reasons. The first is to keep the United States "out", that is, in the sense that we must safeguard the northern approaches to the continent so that the Americans do not feel they have to do it for us. The second is to give Canada leverage on the world scene. As such, after providing adequate forces for homeland

defence, any excess capacity is directed to expeditionary forces mandated for forward security. Effectively, the government uses the Canadian Forces as:

A **Medium Global Force Projection Military** – that is, a military that may not possess the full range of capabilities, but has a credible capacity in certain of them and consistently demonstrates a determination to exercise them at some distance from the homeland, in cooperation with other Force Projection Militaries.

This is not far removed from the vision for the Canadian Forces of 2020 described in Strategy 2020, and as developed from the themes of the 1994 Defence White Paper.

But one is reminded of the commitment-capability gap highlighted by the various studies of the past year. Caught in the Middle in particular exposes the harsh reality that the military foundation of these medium power pretensions is a sham. The present crisis has highlighted the inability of either the Canadian Air Force or the Army to deploy and sustain forces of any meaningful size to a distant theatre, and even the Navy is stretched to its sustainable limit. Following the Leadmark typology further, on a descending scale of 1 to 9, whereas the assessment of the Navy at Rank 3 might for the moment indeed be accurate, the Air Force presently qualifies as a Rank 5 “Adjacent Force Projection Military”, and the Army only as a Rank 7 “Territorial Defence Force”, barely above a Constabulary Force.

In part, the resident capacity of the services is driven by Canada’s geostrategic position. The sheer vastness of the landmass and the offshore estate requires an oceanic navy on each coast and an air force with continental reach, but without a direct land threat there is no “national sovereignty” rationale for a fighting army. The problem is that, during the Cold War, Canadian governments got used to employing the excess capacity of the overseas army for peacekeeping operations, and in the aftermath of the so-called peace dividend typically it is the army that has had to bear the brunt of both cutbacks and a sustained operational tempo.

How, then, to make it all right? That, of course, is the \$1 billion question (that being the amount calculated by Caught in the Middle as the annual shortfall in defence spending). The trick is not simply to restore funding to cover the shortfall, but to deliver to Canadians a military deserving of their upkeep. That can only be accomplished when the paradox of the neutrality of the Canadian state of mind is rationalized with the demonstrated needs of their government, leading to the fashioning of a structure for the Canadian Forces capable of realizing those needs. Understanding the perception and making it the reality is the key.

The longer paper describes a notional future force structure and goes into a general discussion of capabilities. It doesn’t pretend to be comprehensive, but it does point to some of the essential waypoints on the road to recovery. Again in the interests of brevity, I shall lessen that pretension somewhat more, and just hit a couple of highlights. They are not given in any particular order of priority, other than to start with what is at once the toughest but the most important.

First Point: Strategic Direction – Until Canadians and their politicians admit to a general strategic framework for the employment of their military, any attempt to transform the Canadian Forces, let alone to identify future capabilities for it, will be an exercise in frustration. Admittedly, it is unrealistic to expect a clear and detailed statement of strategic intent, if only because the natural inclination of all governments is to keep their options open. However, even within that need for ambiguity, it is not unreasonable to expect basic guidelines and assured funding. An admission of Canada's intended role in the world would provide a somewhat more focused rationale for the Canadian Forces than exists at present, and presumably would inspire a greater government commitment to achieving the necessary capabilities. To Secure A Nation (an analysis published by the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies) makes a powerful case for the issues that need to be addressed in a comprehensive foreign and defence policy review. But a realistic appraisal of Canada's security interests could be a double-edged sword: where such a review might lead to the conversion of the so-called left to the notion of a Rank 3, "Medium Global Force Projection Military," the CF should be prepared for a confirmation of the "peacekeeper" role at the Rank 6 or 7 level. Still, it would be nice to know, if only so we could all stop pretending otherwise.

Second Point: Numbers Count – The process of determining force levels must recognize that there are two dimensions to capability: qualitative and quantitative. Each service is able to boast that certain of their elements reflect the very best of Canadian high technology, but if those capabilities do not exist in sufficient numbers to deploy and sustain substantial formations (that is, an air wing, a naval task group or a brigade), they are of little practical military or diplomatic utility. The vastness of Canadian sovereign territory and the evolving nature of the threat demand a certain minimal structure. The probable need to sustain deployed forces for some years, not just as a matter of "quick in and quick out", will require additional forces to establish and maintain credibility with our allies. And those forces must be able to do more than just show up and be counted present – they must add materially and be able to integrate effectively with their allied counterparts. Indeed, as our larger allies work to streamline their forces into smaller formations, the potential exists that the presence of Canadians in substantial numbers (such as a task group, wing or brigade) can constitute a significant proportion of the allied or coalition force – qualifying for a meaningful place at the political councils.

Third Point: Deployability – Naval and air forces are by their nature essentially self-deployable, but that is contingent upon the maintenance, respectively, of fleet replenishment and long-range air-to-air refueling capabilities. Again, the Army is more problematic, because it must rely upon a hefty combination of air- and sealift to deploy in any significant capacity, and neither of those exist presently in the Canadian Forces. But it is not just a problem of lift capacity. Recognizing that it is a complex matter, the solution must start from a change of organizational attitude. The present administrative structure of the Canadian army is all right for a behemoth like the US Army, but it is not very effective for a force that would like to style itself as rapidly-deployable. We must ask ourselves very seriously, what is our preference – administrative efficiency, or operational effectiveness? Re-structuring along the lines of a marine expeditionary unit, as has been proposed from several quarters, follows the logic that troops can deploy with sufficient quantities of equipment to be immediately operational upon arrival in-theatre. Recognizing that Canadian governments sometimes may not wish to immediately commit forces to action, sea-

basing offers the advantages that transit times can be extended as desired, and that a secure rear area is immediately available.

Fourth Point: Joint vs Combined – The re-structuring of elements of the Army as a marine expeditionary unit would necessarily entail the development of joint capabilities and doctrine, but otherwise “jointness” should not be pursued as an end in itself. At the same time, a realistic appraisal of the required level of jointness needs to be conducted. One consideration must be the fact that if individual elements of the Canadian Forces cannot expect to deploy as more than tactical support elements to larger allied formations, there will be no need for an operational level headquarters other than for domestic operations. From another perspective, because even the Americans are having trouble agreeing upon a joint structure and doctrine, the issue is more complex than merely asserting that a Canadian joint equivalent will evolve in consequence of growing interoperability within the American services.

### Conclusion

In wrapping up then, Canadians have been slow to recognize the enormity of the implications of the events of September 11. Indeed, the response generally has been very much in keeping with the traditional Canadian Way of War. But various studies have pointed to the diminishing effectiveness of Canada’s military, and the present operations against Afghanistan have exposed the faultlines in the Canadian Forces. The signs already exist that our allies – and the United States in particular – will soon push us to get our house in order.

Canada’s national response to world events has not always been haphazard, and need not be so in the future. It has, however, been undertaken lately more as instinct than as rational determination. If the Canadian Forces are to have any hope of realizing the development, funding and employment of a viable military, the renewal process must begin with a full appreciation of the national grand strategy – let’s call it forward security, with the requirement for a Rank 3 Medium Global Force Projection Military.

Thank you.

Leadmark, pp. 44-45. The typology describes a range of forces on a scale from 1 to 9 in descending order of capacity. It is provided here for comparison purposes, and readers are invited to refer to the text for definitions:

Rank 1 – Major Global Force Projection Navy (Complete)

Rank 2 – Major Global Force Projection Navy (Partial)

Rank 3 – Medium Global Force Projection Navy

Rank 4 – Medium Regional Force Projection Navy

Rank 5 – Adjacent Force Projection Navy

Rank 6 – Offshore Territorial Defence Navy

Rank 7 – Inshore Territorial Defence Navy

Rank 8 – Constabulary Navy

Rank 9 – Token Navy