

The Perils and Promise of Strategic Assessment

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In his invitation to make some remarks to you today, Alain Pellerin asked if I would comment on the ‘perils of strategic assessment,’ perhaps citing past examples of mistaken assessments, or even – better yet – assessments never undertaken but that ought to have been. Both the mistakes and the ‘roads not taken,’ he suggested, might then reveal the types of resources and capabilities possession of which, in some future crisis, might avert unfortunate outcomes. In both cases, flawed analysis or no analysis at all, it would thereby be possible to present evidence of the central role of strategic assessment in the foreign and defence policy process. Thinking war, in other words, would be at least as important, in terms of avoiding catastrophe, as waging it. Moreover, to carry the point one additional step, merely taking the time to look into the crystal ball of future conflict is still not enough; a further difficulty, perhaps the most important one, is having the additional time, expertise and resources to make sense of what one sees there. There is, in other words, to reiterate the point made by Roberta Wohlstetter and many, many others, a vast gap between better warning signals and just plain noise, a gap whose width is determined at least as much by technique as by technology.

In complying with our host’s request, though, I should note in advance that the thesis of my remarks is calibrated, more or less, to ingratiate myself to the demographic most prominently represented here this morning: namely, the young, hungry scholars for whom this conference is designed. In short, I would like to make a thoroughly unoriginal case: that improving this country’s capacity for strategic assessment, a skill greatly in demand in this fast-changing, unpredictable world, will depend largely on the willingness of government, the military, and academia to spend on intellectual capital. And not just any eggheads will do. My tongue-in-cheek subtitle for these remarks, echoing an old piece by American historian Dennis Showalter wherein he had issued a "Modest Plea for Guns and Trumpets" amidst the cacophony of the ‘new’ military history, is "A Modest Plea for Pinheads and Poindexters."

Amidst the current tumult raised by advances in military technology, the Revolution in Military Affairs, cyber-diplomacy, or Internet democracy, extolling the virtues of liberal arts graduates, international relations specialists, historians, or economists might be deemed by some the act of intellectual Luddites. In reality, it is anything but. Far from dismissing the social, political and military challenges created by rapid technological and scientific change, developing rational, flexible and effective policy demands attention to both realms: the technical and the contextual, the specific and the general. All other things being equal, it is usually – and understandably - the case that in stringent times non-productive capacity suffers at the hands of productive, labour-intensive (and hence politically sensitive) works, and no more easily palatable alternative is provided here. But the troughs caused by financial or political imperatives can be far less painful, far more manageable when, at the very least, organizations retain the structural capacity and the

intellectual commitment to redress the balance in fatter times. More pointedly, perhaps, long-range forecasts and residual analytical expertise can help fill in the gaps between crises, those inevitable occasions when immediate assessment is most needed and, previous ignorance have eroded the personnel base, is least likely to be available.

Perhaps this was Canada's case in the post-unification, post-Trudeau, post-détente years when the savagery of budget cuts and political indifference had engendered the much-talked-about careerism among senior officers that, in the opinion of critics, robbed the military of strategic direction, strategic initiative, and strategic capacity. Or perhaps it speaks better of the inter-war military whose staff planning Ottawa constrained specifically from fear that thinking war – in this case, specifically, overseas military commitments – might make it so, with potentially destructive consequences for the Canadian body politic. This is a variant of what U.S. Admiral Kidd, a former SACLANT, once referred to at a Royal Military College history conference as the strategic 'can of worms.' Still, the point ought to be clear that organizations or governments that, for want of resources or resolve, currency or courage, allow such skills to atrophy thereby denude strategic capacity in both the absolute and relative sense. Budgets and staff positions and training budgets decline, and that is bad enough, but so too does the predisposition of mind towards invention and engagement that is essential to sound planning and critical thinking.

It risks belabouring the point, but 'thinking beyond the box,' to employ modern organizational jargon, is first predicated on awareness of what the box itself is, and the milieu in which it is situated. These skills are intuitive and obvious, but expensive too. Discarding them, or ignoring them, is easy and cost-free; supporting them frequently requires political fortitude, and bureaucratic influence, of the first order. More than an encumbrance for politicians and bureaucrats anxious to avoid controversy and tack closely to the status quo, however, attitudinal curiosity, channeled by professional training and scholarly apprenticeship, is critical to any vibrant organization. Its proper balance with more technical elements in the requisite skills mix will always be a matter of great delicacy, but the dangers to adaptability and, occasionally, survival occasioned by complacency are manifest, both in history and in current practice.

In all of this, of course, other imperatives will continue to apply. Entreaties to activism, for example, should not be confused with invitations to partisanship. The neutrality and detachment of the military services and the bureaucracy must never give way in the face of clear and present dangers to their professional cohesion, as long as the political process itself continues to function. Even a professional instrument must sometimes take umbrage, and feel compelled to do so, when threats to its health undermine the civil-military compact itself, but in functioning democracies such cases are exceedingly rare. The line between responsibility and repudiation remains permeable, but less so in some countries than in others. It can also change over time.

The new *Canadian Military Journal* and *The Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin* appear to herald a new era in the ability of serving military personnel to engage in substantive public debate over subjects within their areas of professional competence. Both are exceedingly welcome additions to the process of strategic debate. The novelty of this trend, however, passes a most unflattering judgement on previous events. Were past professional standards sacrificed on the altar of political conformity? Did originality suffer at the hands of obedience? Most academic experts have already answered in the affirmative, and passed harsh judgement in the process.

Had political supremacy in Canada ever been threatened seriously by military independence, had Mackenzie King's 'generals' revolt' in 1944 been generalized reality and not political invention, then it would be easier to justify the course in which Canadian military affairs ran in the period after 1945.

As it stood, the civil-military balance was never seriously in question. Nor, for the most part, was Canadian domestic security. Canadians, in other words, have quite literally enjoyed the luxury of having their cake and eating it too. And there is a further point: military dissatisfaction notwithstanding, in the long run the relative societal cost of military subservience in Canada was surely lower than the reverse might otherwise have been. Canada's military-industrial complex, Peter Langille and other alarmists to the contrary, has never endangered the country's political-economic equilibrium as has, quite probably, its American equivalent. It is a small point, perhaps, but an important one: strategic assessment, however dangerous the external environment in which it occurs, unfolds against a far broader domestic and international backdrop and amidst conditions that might, quite properly, militate against its own effectiveness. Military officers who rail against the injustice of this truth are modern-day Canutes, for they might more easily hold back the waves. But from their ranks too comes an enduring paradox: military organizations that fail to cultivate such questioners, such disturbers of the political and strategic peace, have stagnated in peacetime and been demolished in war. Thinking well truly is, to twist slightly the modern phrase, the best revenge.

In fleshing out some of these rather general points I would turn first to recent Canadian affairs, drawing shamelessly, with your indulgence, on some personal anecdotes to make the case, returning later to broad principles.

The first point concerns Canada's response to and handling of issues related to the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). At a recent workshop on the human resource implications for Canada of the RMA, several things struck me with regard to the handling of RMA as a strategic issue. First, while there were several human resource and personnel professionals in attendance, there were few military operators. Second, there were only two academic analysts present (roughly one-sixth of the total). And third, only one member in the group had ever, to the best of my knowledge, studied seriously the RMA. None had ever published on it.

The resulting deliberations, which subsequently resulted in a long series of policy recommendations, while high quality and thoroughly engaging in every respect, were thus nevertheless impoverished by lack of specialist expertise on the very subject under review. Further, and not surprising given the composition of the group, the recommendations leaned heavily on several predictable approaches, including the need for vastly increased technical skill, especially in computers and high technology. These were not insignificant, much less incorrect, conclusions; indeed, in most respects they represented the superb summation of an engaging debate. But the fact remains that they were reached in the near-total absence of either specialist knowledge of the RMA itself or, perhaps more importantly, of the broader political, economic and military challenges it might pose to Canadian interests.

It is easy to follow the rationale in this process. Because human resources policy is not necessarily a 'sharp end' issue but is far more managerial and administrative in nature, then

perhaps operators and strategic analysts are not needed in the process. Moreover, because the RMA is most easily thought of in terms of high technology, then clearly the most fruitful course of discussion is to assess the high-tech needs of tomorrow, in both the civilian and military context. The determination then proceeds, almost by definition, from a consideration of computer programming, software development and system analytical skills and the best ways to assess, train, acquire, and retain individuals with the targeted skills. This is not to impugn either the debate itself or the skill of its organizers. It is simply to describe the way in which, in this case, an attempt to think strategically about a critical issue led, with astonishing speed, into a practical cul-de-sac the boundaries of which were set by pre-existing assumptions, most of them concerning job training, computer skills, and personnel retention policies. Put more bluntly, an attempt to think 'outside the box' in terms of technological progress thus led directly, and almost immediately, into a markedly similar vessel structured around very preliminary, and occasionally threadbare, assumptions about developments that most of the group, by their own admission, only vaguely understood. Moreover, notably absent from both the discussion and the recommendations was any attempt to situate carefully human resources policy philosophically against the defence department's core mission, which is to facilitate the CF's training for and conduct of *military* operations.

How might this have happened in a process the express purpose of which was to examine the broader implications of the RMA? There are, to be sure, numerous factors but one, surely, is the lack of attention accorded the RMA within Canadian defence (and academic) circles until roughly 1996-97. Certainly not all military or civilian analysts now working on the RMA file will agree with this assessment, but the question really is the number working on such docket in 1994 or 1995 or 1996, not the number currently assigned to the task. Indeed, in the summer of 1996 a search for the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' on the Department of National Defence web site returned not a single lead; searching for the related subject, 'Information Warfare,' returned only two sources (both by the same author). Such anecdotal evidence, to be sure, is hardly damning on its own, but an appreciation of the extent of RMA-related thinking in the United States, Australia, and Great Britain by, say, 1996-97, adds a modicum of poignancy to the tale. Interviews with Canadian planners largely confirm the point. In truth, while, especially in the navy, Canadian officers were beginning to assess the extent and likely implications of the RMA for Canadian forces and Canadian interests, and many individuals were extremely well read, official manifestations of interest were few and far between, as Andrew Richter has demonstrated. There were, until quite recently, virtually no RMA references in speeches by the Chief of Defence Staff or the minister or other departmental representatives, no official (publicly available) studies, and little indication of interest of any sort. Current initiatives, including the RMA concept paper produced in spring 1999, give every indication that Canada has now climbed happily on the RMA freight-train but, to risk impertinence, timing is everything and we were nowhere to be found when it first left the station.

The reasons for this state of affairs were perhaps more situational than attitudinal. Whatever officials might have wanted to do, the mid 1990s saw the Canadian Forces beset by devastating controversy, not to mention an extensive internal reorganization to absorb staff cuts. The entire organism turned dramatically inward, both as a reflex mechanism against an external environment generally perceived as hostile, and in the more helpful search for reforms that would bring it safely through the trial. Money, resources, and political support ebbed steadily

from a once-proud military embarrassed by Somalia and the subsequent scandals on which it shed light. Pilloried in the press, Parliament, and in the court of public opinion, it was sometimes literally true that some directorates, nominally tasked with strategic assessment and long-term direction, became inevitably mired in more immediate (and more political) concerns. Public relations became at least as important as policy planning, institutional survival more critical than strategic direction. In the long run, it may prove a mark of great institutional character that the defence department moved so quickly after the Somalia Commission report to produce several important strategic documents. But its earlier failure to address critically and in detail the implications of RMA, or even to pose properly (and publicly) the questions raised by American developments in this field, remains extant. It also provides, I think, evidence of the two dangers mentioned previously in my brief introduction to the subject: that, quantitatively, scarce resources can be overwhelmed by crisis or rapid change; and that, qualitatively, assessment can suffer from over-tasking, political drift, and the erosion over time of intellectual capacity.

The situation is not specific to the Department of National Defence. Intelligence analysts outside the defence department are regularly tasked with geographical or subject case loads that prejudice in-depth, long-term planning in favour of crisis management simply by virtue of their extent and complexity. There are certainly exceptions, like the fine annual assessments produced by the Directorate of Strategic Analysis, but they are still the exceptions that prove the rule. Five years after the 1990-91 Persian Gulf conflict, the Directorate of Strategic Analysis had yet to produce a paper on the RMA. When the American military historian John Lynn noted at a recent conference in Kingston that two-thirds of the world is covered with water and the other third with papers in the RMA, he therefore could not have had Canada in mind. Indeed, Lynn's remark is less a joke than an observation: internet-based RMA bibliographies at US military training and education centres run regularly to 40 or 50 very dense pages, most of the sources in which have appeared in the past decade, and especially in the past five years. The Canadian component of this literature can still be numbered in single digits.

There is nothing inherently new in this, either in Canada's lack of governmental resources or in the inattention provided to developing extra-governmental capacity that might enhance strategic planning in critical areas. Hal Klepak argued years ago that Canada's subservience to Allied intelligence providers and its fixation on the Cold War balance would present severe challenges to a small defence establishment once the certainty of Canada's security interlocutors had vanished. (The 1994 Defence White Paper, incidentally, makes much the same point.) He was correct to worry. Desk officers once tasked with assessing the readiness levels of Soviet tank and motorized rifle divisions were soon watching military reform in multiple countries, assessing environmental, economic and political risks, while simultaneously eyeing 'new' security challenges like drug trafficking, terrorism, and environmental degradation. They were, and remain, massive, unfamiliar files, especially for military officers with no background in international relations, diplomatic history, or macro-economics.

As I have tried to suggest already, accounting for this state of affairs is at once easy and extraordinarily difficult. It is easy in the sense that resource shortfalls and multi-tasking explain a great deal, but what of quality or the prospects for improvement over time? Is Canada, as a senior general put to me recently, a nation that is, more by choice than by circumstance, comfortably tactical in its security orientation, eschewing strategic assessment on grounds of

high cost or high politics, limited liability or limited interest? Can analysts criticize the military and intelligence services, in other words, for not being proactive in areas where political leaders are content with stasis?

One interpretation of the Canadian political behaviour during the Second World War, after all, posits a cautious Prime Minister Mackenzie King not pressing Canada's case in the higher direction of the war, largely from fear that added influence would bring added responsibility. He was undoubtedly aware that increasing defence ties with the United States tied Canada more closely to Washington's defence priorities, but that was a far less questionable tactic in 1941 than it might appear a half century later to, say, critics of Canada's continued membership in NORAD. Indeed, as Andrew Richter's doctoral dissertation tries to point out, Canada's independent strategic thought, long assumed to have been smothered by American strategic nuclear culture in the 1950s and 1960s, in fact progressed quietly along throughout the period, despite the gradual Americanization of Canada's military in other ways.

This, to be sure, is not the majority view, even though Richter cites George Lindsay in supporting his more revisionist account. Far more common is the strategic subservience argument long raised, in slightly different form, by Tory critics of Mackenzie King's more continentalist policy and, in even more avowedly ideological garb, socialist critics of Canada's long-time association with the United States and the Western military alliance. Countering either view, the partisan and often personal Tory indictment or the ideological and vaguely class-based leftist critique, has always been difficult. This was not so much due to the merits of the case, which were – and remain – inordinately sympathetic to our foreign policy mandarins, but to the overwhelming evidence that Canada did, in fact, play a largely subservient role in military and security terms. Similarities in outlook between Canadian and American Cold War policies, therefore, were clearly – in NDP eyes, for instance – evidence of either overt control by Washington or, perhaps even worse, mindless dependency by economically-inspired Canadian elites. That modern democracies could, of their own accord, cooperate on matters of critical security, for obvious reasons, but differ on the margins of their interests – trade, human rights, cultural policy, even sovereignty – such critics viewed virtually as nonsense.

More specific answers, however sensible, obvious and true, have frequently met a similar fate. NORAD's defenders, for example, make a telling case that intelligence data provided Canada by American sources under the NORAD rubric is essential to protecting Canadian interests, one of which, of course, is cordial relations with the American military. If Jack Granstein's argument that Britain's weakness after the Second World War forced Canada into the arms of the United States is true, it is therefore perhaps equally plausible to assert that strategic weakness, at least in the sense of both force size and intelligence assets, helps keep us there.

The last comment is admittedly incendiary, but the issue is nevertheless critical: what are the national consequences of strategic weakness, either inadvertently created or consciously espoused? What effects do globalization or military downsizing or 'new security' challenges have on this equation? What are the costs of aloofness, or of armed neutrality, to reach back to Gwyn Dyer's old series, *In Defence of Canada*? Conversely, what are the advantages of continued engagement? And in either case, what can we do to help ourselves? Is the theoretical truth, that military impotence leads to strategic subservience, as valid as it might at first glance

appear, or might military weakness breed habits of thought and deed militating towards greater independence, a process helped along by the collapse of the one real mutual enemy, the Soviet Union?

There is clearly a value judgement here. A country that began life as a more or less subservient imperial colony perhaps need make no apology for taking roughly 60 years to open an embassy in the neighbouring United States. But a G-7 nation with a distinguished military history, a splendid peacekeeping record, and close personal and political ties to most of the world's advanced military powers, has greater difficulty explaining the abortive Zaire mission, its response to the RMA, and its current difficulties cashing foreign policy cheques with defence force funds. The recent about-face on military commitments to Kosovo is evidence of a distinct lack of coordination between political imperatives and military practicalities in defence policy although, to be fair, it might also presage the closing of this long-open gap. Opting for 'vanguard forces,' by default, in other words, might be politically limiting and an embarrassing admission of strategic incapacity, but it is also honest, practical and a firm foundation for effective planning. Press criticism of Canada's tiny NATO commitments in September 1999 and subsequent statements by new Secretary General George Robertson on how Canada 'languished' behind its allies in military spending provide at least one good start for such critical thinking to begin: Canada's future in European security and the NATO alliance. Reconciling the sometimes competing demands of human security and defence policy, as David Rudd, Joseph Jockel, Denis Stairs, and others have already pointed out, is another vital area for critical assessment.

But let us keep things in perspective. Just as it is possible to construct a version of the recent past in which Canada's capacity for strategic assessment comes off far better than that described here, so too is it possible to see in the strategic imperative a wolf in sheep's clothing. The Wizards of Armageddon, strategic bean counters, Robert MacNamara's self-righteous whiz kids: all are associated in our collective conscience with the notion of strategic assessment run amok. Indeed, the idea that intellectual capacity, especially that resident outside the defence and, especially heinous perhaps, the military community might be protected and cultivated in tough times as an essential component of a state's security policy might seem intuitively absurd, if not actually dangerous. From Herman Kahn's 'thinking the unthinkable' to Colin Gray's 'winnable nuclear war,' the deadly logic of strategic assessment has led, and can lead again, to death-defying political leaps and the tragic corruption of otherwise sensible military priorities. The American conduct of the war in Vietnam was, in many ways, a product of the triumph of strategic thinking, just as, to a great extent, the outbreak of war in Korea in 1950 resulted largely from its conspicuous absence.

Vietnam, to be sure, is no reason not to espouse, to court, to create the conditions under which independent strategic assessment can flourish, but it is to remind ourselves that too much of anything can be a bad thing. Thus, the strategic orgasm that once led to discussions of escalation dominance and the winnable nuclear war is echoed now in renewed discussion over the military utility of nuclear weapons in the counter-biological and counter-chemical roles. Both discourses serve as reminders that the challenges posed by the logic of our strategic convictions are as pointed today as during the Cuban Missile Crisis. If we are ever again debating the number of angels who might dance safely on the head of a pin, we should acknowledge forthwith that angels likely have no time for such foolishness.

But if too little, too rapid, or too much strategic assessment can all, in their turn, be bad things, what is a country to do?

Part of the answer, as Canada discovered two decades ago and American universities figured out long before that, is to buttress national strategic capacity with non-government sources. In Canada, for example, the old Military and Strategic Studies program, now renamed the Security and Defence Forum, has pulled from Canada's tattered academic hat a pretty good-sized rabbit, helping to create two generations of scholars with expertise in areas of direct concern to national interests. The Department of Foreign Affairs operates a somewhat similar – if more frequently criticized – operation through its Centre for Foreign Policy Development. Both programs breed, by definition, the 'pseudo-academics' derided glibly by Scott Taylor, editor of *Esprit de Corps*, in the sense that academics take government money in exchange for both core research and policy-relevant studies, but both also produce good value for money. Indeed, over the years these research streams have funded many of the government's harshest public critics on various aspects of defence and foreign policy. More importantly, they have broadened immeasurably the talent pool for advice, assistance and personnel. Indeed, given the generally unhealthy political and economic environment for private or arms-length foreign policy think tanks in this country, the DND and DFAIT funding units are, very nearly, the only game in town.

A second answer is found in the requirement for governments to retain, within or outside the formal strategic assessment directorates, sufficient expertise to manage the increasing diversity of security challenges. Thus, while trimming the fat may well include, figuratively speaking of course, a platoon's worth of corpulent desk jockeys with groaning shelves of scholarly books and defence journals, the long-term costs of such strategic decapitation, whether of history research units or area intelligence specialists, are overwhelmingly evident.

A third possibility, to split the difference between the preceding two. This would mean permitting in a far more organized, formalized fashion than has been the case to date, the easy transfer of personnel and information from strategic to academic culture, and the reverse. The formal organs of strategic assessment would thus be far more susceptible to outside assistance, advice and cross-fertilization by outside expertise. No doubt any such effort would raise cries over the co-option of academic principles by government for-pay services but, frankly, there are tougher loads to bear than the occasional opprobrium of one's academic colleagues, many of whose ideological tails wag far too vigorously in any case. Subject to reasonable security precautions on one side and methodological rigour on the other, there appears little substantive reason, aside from bureaucratic choice, for a more-American style system of government-academic interchange not to be encouraged. Short-term or specialist contracts for academics working on targeted priorities are a start, but they far too limited in extent and, frequently, far too personal in arrangement to have any broader strategic impact.

Finally, as Doug Fraser at CCIPS, Alain Pellerin here at the Conference of Defence Associations, and Ernie Regehr at Project Ploushares have already figured out, perhaps the simplest possibility is also the most obvious: better internal coordination among existing agencies promises to be at least as productive as many quantitative change in resources. The CDA developed this idea very well in their concept of a Canadian National Security Council.

In all of this, of course, there are few easy answers, and no straw men. By and large, Canada's security establishment works harder, thinks better, and delivers more than most other similarly sized organizations. Whether or not, for example, as Jack Granatstein and others once charged, an 'anti-intellectual' penumbra covered the Canadian Forces officer corps, recent initiatives on officer training, education, leadership development, strategic planning, and publishing are, at the very least, modifying the grounds for indictment. It is all for the good. Attempting to critique helpfully a process is not to damn with faint praise.

Still, it is frequently true that we do not know what we think do, and even more often true that what we actually know is either irrelevant or, sometimes, dangerous. It is always the case, however, that what little certainty we possess is enhanced immeasurably by adequate structures, good people, and professional methods. This is less about money than training, less about numbers than attitude. In a world, in short, where information is vital and ever-changing, where dissemination is relatively easy but assessment frightfully difficult, where quantity can be massaged by technology but quality remains a human value added, strategic assessment will remain the preserve of dedicated, well-trained professionals of broad mind and flexible methods. Information technology has made information specialists more, not less valuable, ladies and gentlemen, and the real professionals in that practice are not, and never were, technicians or programmers.