

The Context of Canadian Defence Policy

David J. Bercuson, May 23, 2016

It is a truism that the Canadian Armed Forces first mission is the defence of Canada and that its second mission is to do what it can to defend North America. But Canada cannot be defended by the CAF alone, so in fact these missions are the same. It is also true that a “formal” attack on Canada or the United States is highly unlikely short of a major interstate war and that a major interstate war is itself highly unlikely. Thus Canada’s real role in the defence of itself and consequently of its part of North America is primarily a reconnaissance role. Canada must have or acquire the very best technologically advanced interceptor aircraft, surface ships and undersea capability to always know who is approaching our territorial air, sea and undersea territory and “usher them away.” At the same time Canada must collect as much information from unknown vehicles approaching our waters or airspace such as radar emissions, underwater sound displays, etc., for intelligence purposes. And of course, Canada must share the results of its reconnaissance with our United States ally.

In the very unlikely event that an approach to Canada’s territory is done with hostile intent to “attack” Canada or the United States, Canada must have as much capability as prudence would dictate to hold off the attack until the far more substantial forces of the United States can be brought to our aid.

But Canada is also one node in a global network of trade, transportation, migration, free navigation and, where formal or informal allies are concerned, defence obligations. And Canada must be prepared to send military forces abroad when informal allies (such as Japan) and especially formal allies (as in NATO) seek our help.

Canadians often act as if Canada is a lone player in international affairs. But for reasons of trade alone (our large dependence on a rules-based international order) to ensure the safety and security of trade, we must be ready to act with allies or “informal allies” such as Japan, Australia, the Gulf Cooperation Council, etc., to maintain order and security in the global commons. That means that given Canada’s limited military ability, the nation must decide three issues: first, which parts of the globe are most important to Canadian interests; second, which parts of the defence spectrum should Canada endeavor to cover; third

to what degree should Canada engage militarily in areas that Canada has few, if any, national interests. Perhaps the question of what Canada's national interests are ought to be undertaken as soon as possible in a global affairs policy review.

Much attention has been given to the question if Canada has the will or the ability to meet NATO's new target of 2% of GDP on defence spending which the previous government committed Canada to and which the new government has not disavowed. Certainly for reasons of inadequate infrastructure alone, not to mention ongoing procurement problems that oblige governments to keep pushing back completion dates, it would be impossible to meet that standard any time soon. The military can only absorb limited amounts of additional funds as it is currently organized. But the fact is that the only nation that Canada must attempt to satisfy on matters of defence spending is the United States. And if Canada is prepared to get active and stay active in a high profile manner in some area (geographical or in cyberspace) that is important to the United States, much pressure from the US to meet the 2% target will be mitigated as it was when Canada was engaged in Kandahar. A larger and more sustained effort in the Caribbean might do the trick as a first Canadian priority that would also serve Canadian interests due to Canada's strong financial, mining and other commercial interests there and the growing number of Canadians with strong family ties to the Caribbean. This question is, of course, a matter of foreign policy priorities but the basic point is that the US did not press Canada to increase defence spending when our men and women were being killed in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is over for us, but we need to find some other compelling mission or missions that will show that our importance is not to be measured solely in how much we spend, but also by what we do.