

**RESPONSE TO REQUEST FOR SOME BRIEF COMMENTS IN ADVANCE OF DEFENCE POLICY  
REVIEW ROUNDTABLE CONSULTATION IN HALIFAX ON 28 JUNE 2016**

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**(1) General Observations Stimulated by the Background Paper**

The background paper provided to the participants in advance of the meeting is an excellent review of the major issues confronting government authorities at the broad “defence policy” (or “security policy”) level. Having said that, old hands will probably recognize the framing of the problems involved as very familiar, for the most part reflecting the continuity of Canada’s geographical location, its fundamental and on-going security requirements, its political culture and the political preferences and peacetime policy expectations that it generates , and the like. The “key roles” of the CAF as identified on p. 5, for example, have been reiterated, with minor difference in phrasing and presentation, in almost every declaratory policy document in the defence and security field over the past several decades.

At more specific levels of analysis, there are differences, of course. The Cold War, for example, is nowhere to be found, and even disputes with the Russian Federation now have a much less cataclysmic flavor than they once did. Peacekeeping enterprises have been replaced by a more eclectic array of peace operations, the latter often entailing combat missions accompanied in various ways by ancillary attempts (in conjunction with other government departments as well as NGOs and the like) to engage in social engineering in targeted polities and communities abroad. In some areas, notably in relation to cyber security and the implications for military operations of advances in the development of space-based surveillance and communications technologies as well as unmanned systems for delivering military payloads, the questions at issue are relatively novel, although the literature on them is now expanding rapidly. The growing threat represented by parastatal and other unconventional players who are capable of operating on a transnational basis also looms much larger than it once did (although variations on the phenomenon were in fact widely evident in modern times even before the current age of so-called “terrorism,” as in the context of externally-supported guerilla campaigns fired by anti-colonial or radical political forces of other kinds in various parts of the world during the decades following World War II).

These new developments in the threat environment often call for responses from government agencies that are not directly related to the Department of National Defence and are frequently engaged in pursuing their own mandates in their own way. In some contexts (if good luck, good leadership, and good will are all to be found), such agencies may function (partly, at least) in close co-operation with the CAF (hence “whole of government” operations), although practices in the field here may not always measure up to the ambitions implied by the official declaratory policy rhetoric. In a world of silo bureaucracies and segregated budgets, after all, co-operation is often very hard work. (The problem is clearly identified – albeit in diplomatically reassuring mode – in the background paper’s section on “Procurement” (p. 23)).

But with these sorts of qualifications, the paper really does have a very familiar ring when compared with its antecedents, which is hardly surprising. Among other things, it reflects Canada's physical place in the world (especially vis-à-vis the United States), its relatively modest capabilities (both actual and potential), and the fact that in the end its circumstances mean that its contributions to the meeting of most major international security challenges are bound to be contributive but not decisive. We *have* to 'partner,' but the partners we choose know that in most situations (perhaps excepting some minor ones that may arise from time to time on our terrain) we will not be a primary determinant of outcomes. That being so, it's especially hard to decide with confidence how much to spend, and on what, particularly when future security challenges are so hard to identify in advance (Who in the 1990s would have predicted that Canada would be fielding military forces in an Afghanistan war zone for more than a decade starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?) It was this phenomenon that Mike MccGwire had in mind years ago when he made the observation that "Canada's defence problem is that it has no defence problem." It was also part of what another well-informed observer "from away" (Nils Orvik) had in mind when he commented in the same period that Canada's defence policy was really governed by the desire to mount a "defence against help" – the kind of help, that is, that we would get from the United States, whether we liked it or not, if we failed to do a reasonably acceptable job of helping ourselves. In some ways – even most ways – our position in these respects is enviable. The dilemma of our policy-makers is in fact benignly existential. But open-ended freedom of manoeuvre can feel troublesome and hard to bear for those who must, in the end, decide.

## **(2) The Hazard of Chasing Root Causes of Violent Conflict**

These general ruminations aside, and given space limitations, I will comment on only one policy matter of substance. I have commented on it often before, but it concerns me still, even though there are signs that policy-makers elsewhere as well as in Canada have learned (the hard way) an important lesson. It is about time they did. They really should not have needed to learn it at all.

That lesson is that searching for, and acting on, the root causes of international conflict as the best response to outbreaks of international violence and inhibiting its further propagation is the best, and certainly the most rational, way to proceed. On the surface, this argument is both plausible and persuasive, and on an intellectual level it corresponds to what most of "social science" would incline many of its practitioners to argue. Poverty, autocratic rule, social injustice, incompetent public administration, the debilitation of women, youth unemployment, pervasive and debilitating disease, want of education (particularly education in the tradition of the Enlightenment), and a long list of other candidates for inclusion on the list of pertinent causal forces are the real problem. The violence itself is not so much cause as consequence. So we need in seeking a peaceful world to focus on the factors that lead to it by enriching the poor, democratizing government, remedying social injustice, teaching public servants how they should more properly do their jobs, encouraging the liberation of women, and all the rest.

The argument in some respects may be sound – provided we do not assume that *our* way is necessarily the best way, not just for us, but for others everywhere else, too. But it neglects the reality that getting from here to there is likely to be a very long-term enterprise; that the process will be powerfully resisted by well-entrenched indigenous elites; that it will be regarded not only as an unpleasant enterprise but also as none of our business by many of those upon whose co-operation its success will ultimately depend; that the resources required for the task are usually beyond the reach of the communities at issue and also beyond the reach (politically, at least) of our own taxpayers; and so on. If, moreover, we draw our policy conclusions on the basis of our own successes (however mixed these may be), we may be forgetting how long and difficult (and often how bloody) was the transition to modernity in our own histories.

We may also be forgetting the vivid experience of our earlier attempts, and the attempts of some of our best friends, to accomplish similar sorts of ends in other contexts – e.g., in their imperial policies, in the work of UN Specialized Agencies, in the intervention of a wide variety of development assistance initiatives, and the like. A large part of this activity has failed miserably (although it may well have relieved a lot of human misery here and there). There have been successes (as in India, for example – so far, at least). But the British were involved with Indian elites – and even created some of them – over a period of several centuries that began long before they were liberal democrats themselves. We transformed the political cultures (it can be argued) of Germany and Japan in relatively short order. But many of the requirements were already well-established in those societies, and in the wake of a world war that killed more than 70,000,000 people, it shouldn't be hard to recall what it took to get their attention.

I make this comment not to disparage our attempts to reduce levels of human misery around the world. But we should recall that modernization is a disruptive process, and in itself it can generate hostility, especially if we try to do the job with the help of military force. Whole-of-government operations are certainly pertinent, but we need to think such complex enterprises through very carefully before embarking on them with high expectations. If we don't, we will do a lot of harm – as we have already done even in cases in which we think at first that we have stumbled on the right formula (as in Libya). We will make mistakes, too, even when we assume that modernizing disruptions initiated by indigenous populations (*vide* the outcomes so far of the so-called “Arab Spring”) are breakthroughs that are certain to advance the modernizing cause (*vide* the so-called “Arab Spring”).

Social scientists like to identify general patterns and then suggest useful policies that might be derived from them. But policy-makers should remember what they have good reason to know very well, which is that the world of international affairs is a messy, unpredictable and kaleidoscopic environment. We thus cannot avoid the need for a nuanced understanding of the forces at work in every individual case. Wandering into Afghanistan with little understanding of how the society thinks and works, and what it really cares about (as we – and most of the other intervenors – actually did) simply doesn't cut the mustard. The resulting experience taught us a lot. But that experience came, unnecessarily, from a school of very hard knocks.

Or so, with very considerable conviction, I opine.