

Submission to Defence Policy Review Roundtable, Toronto, 20 May 2016

By Adam Chapnick

Embedding a commitment to reliability in Canadian defence policy

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important conversation. I intend to focus my comments on a less prominent question that I think might nonetheless merit some consideration by the Defence Ministry: how can Canada create, reaffirm, and/or maintain a reputation as a reliable international ally without compromising the spirit and practice of democracy within the Westminster parliamentary system?

In plain language, how can the Canadian government portray Canada as reliable at the alliance table – something I believe to be critical to an effective defence policy – if the opposition has a duty to oppose the policies that it puts forward?

Canada is not a global superpower, nor is there reason to believe that it will become one in the near future. As a result, Canadian contributions to international peace and security are rarely, if ever, unilateral. It follows that the international component of Canadian defence policy is typically framed, and rightly so, as contributing to informal coalitions and formal alliances.

The efficacy of coalitions and alliances depends in large part on the reliability of their participating members. Moreover, in a world of complex defence and security challenges, it is rare that any conflict can be resolved in weeks, or even months. For coalitions and alliances to succeed, they must not only craft a workable strategic vision, they must also see that vision through.

The latter can prove particularly difficult for a country like Canada. Too many times in our history, we have watched one federal government commit to a specific level of defence funding, a specific procurement initiative, or a specific international mission, only to have its successor renege. The message such action sends to our allies – that Canada's word is only good until the next election – hardly enables us to leverage our contributions for proportionate influence.

At the same time, as a parliamentary democracy in the tradition of the Westminster system, we live within a political process that all but obligates the opposition to oppose. After all, if the opposition does not hold the government to account, then who will?

These two conflicting forces – one calling on Canada to make commitments that are capable of outlasting the leadership of any particular government, and the other all but compelling governments-in-waiting to oppose the actions of those in power – leave Ottawa in an awkward position, particularly when it comes to international policy.

Our allies have come to recognize that our word, particularly in the lead-up to a federal election or during a period of minority government, is not worth very much.

At the most basic of levels, the solution is easy: when it comes to critical national interests, bring the opposition into the conversation to create strategic continuity: create a sense of shared responsibility for the national future. But how can an opposition become part of the national security conversation without compromising its ability to oppose government initiatives?

The theoretical answer is to agree on the “what” and to leave the “how” up for debate: establish consensus around Canada’s fundamental defence and security interests, like the importance of a stable, trusting relationship with the United States, but allow the details to be regularly hashed out inside and outside of the House of Commons. The reality, in today’s politically charged domestic environment, is much more difficult.

It seems to me, however, that if this review could result in a widely accepted national commitment to position Canada as a reliable ally, then we will have come a long way.

A reliable ally might not commit to every UN or NATO mission, for example, but if it does commit, it does so without excessive caveats, and it stays engaged until a collective decision is made to end it.

A reliable ally might not allocate 2% of its GDP to defence, but when it does commit to a specific purchase, and especially one that promotes interoperability with its allies, it sees that purchase through regardless of changes to the fiscal context at home, or to the political party in power.

A reliable ally might not agree with every decision that its partners make, but it finds ways to make its disagreements known without compromising the long-term integrity of its alliances.

In sum, it seems to me that one of the keys to the future effectiveness of Canadian defence policy, and by extension the Canadian Armed Forces, is finding a way to establish and maintain a reputation as a reliable alliance member and global contributor to international peace and security.

Given the contemporary political operating environment, doing so will not be easy, but failing to do so will compromise the pursuit of Canadian interests now and into the future.