

Ernie Regehr: Notes for the Yellowknife Roundtable on a New Defence Policy for Canada
24 May 2016

Threats to Canada's security

Official threat assessments have for decades now consistently concluded that Canada faces no current or foreseeable military threats. Descriptions of post-Cold War challenges to Canadian security have focused on terrorism, natural and human-made disasters, human and drug trafficking, and other public safety and law enforcement issues. Around the world, and in some communities in Canada, the most prominent experiences of insecurity come not from threats of attack by foreign forces, but from the likes of economic marginalization, environmental degradation and climate change, inadequate health care, the absence of reliable educational opportunities, political isolation or exclusion, and the denial of basic rights.

These are serious challenges and regularly involve creeping social and political disintegration, loss of confidence in the public institutions that are supposed to serve the interests and well-being of people, and escalating instability and violence. Social and political challenges evolve into law enforcement and military challenges.

The Canadian Armed Forces at home

In the absence of direct military threats at home, the CAF focus on domain awareness and control, as well as on assistance to civil authorities and agencies in law enforcement, search and rescue, and emergency responses to natural and human-made disasters. While those missions relate substantially to public safety and law enforcement, domain awareness and control link to the protection of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Canada. Being reliably aware of activity within, or in the approaches to, national territory, preventing unauthorized intrusions, and ensuring enforcement of Canadian laws and regulations aid public safety, but they are also essential for confirming the ongoing absence of military threats. Surveillance and control functions also fulfill an obligation to neighbors to credibly assure them that no threats to their security are harbored in Canada.

The Prime Minister's mandate letter to the Minister of National Defence thus appropriately calls for increased attention to this role, directing the Minister to "renew Canada's focus on surveillance and control of Canadian territory and approaches, particularly our Arctic regions."

North American defence cooperation

Canada and the United States obviously have a well-established tradition and infrastructure (through NORAD and a variety of other bilateral agreements and mechanisms) for cooperating on continental defence. Mexico has been absent from this arrangement, an omission that ought to be remedied.

In Canada-US defence relations, the model has been to cooperate in surveillance and domain awareness, under normal circumstances relying on national assets for intelligence gathering, surveillance, reconnaissance, and control, while sharing information that is needed to create a comprehensive continental picture of respective domains. Enforcement is, and should be, national, even though NORAD provides for a joint air defence command, and procurement of air and marine systems should be responsive to the day-to-day needs of these national missions.

The peacetime practice has been for each country to use its own assets in enforcement, and it would make sense to formally terminate the peacetime joint command. It would be prudent to explore continent-wide (including Mexico) arrangements for defence cooperation in the event of security emergencies. There are already provisions in place to allow for cross border emergency assistance in aid of civil authorities.

The Canadian Armed Forces overseas

Canadian security depends on a world order that is stable and prosperous, that functions on the basis of agreed rules that apply to all, and according to which Canadian sovereignty and territorial integrity are recognized and respected by others. Canada's security, like our economy, is significantly affected by conditions and events far beyond our borders. It is thus within the vital security interests of Canada to do as much as possible to prevent chaos by supporting economic development and good governance where these are failing, along with conflict resolution and prevention diplomacy.

Canada is also in a position to provide military assistance in locations where inattention to human insecurity has led to escalating disorder and direct military challenges to national authorities and institutions, and where vulnerable populations need protection. Any such Canadian contribution will necessarily be part of a larger international undertaking, and the Government is to be commended for its intention renew Canada's commitment to UN peace operations. While complex UN peace support operations regularly involve combat elements, they are not traditional war-fighting scenarios. The overriding objectives of UN peace support operations are to create space for political engagement (not to force externally decided political outcomes), to protect civilians and confront spoilers, and to facilitate humanitarian and reconstruction efforts. The domestic roles of the CAF are largely compatible with such stabilization efforts in UN operations.

Spending on defence and security

Canada is a rich country and can afford to make major contributions to international peace and security while providing for public safety and security at home. But peace and security needs are not primarily military – neither in pursuit of security at home nor in support of international peace and security. While Canadian forces carry out critically important defence and security roles at home and abroad, the security and well being of people, wherever they are, is not assured by military means as much as by economic, social, and political supports. Spending needs to reflect those security priorities, which means that Canada needs to correct its current and serious underfunding of ODA, while maintaining defence spending at roughly current levels.

Two inescapable realities point to the importance of increased spending on security measures beyond the focus on military capacity: increasing acknowledgement of the need to address and ameliorate the roots of armed conflict; and an almost universal acknowledgement that deeply rooted political conflicts like those now devastating Iraq and Syria and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa do not ultimately have military solutions. While there will inevitably continue to be military dimensions to confronting advanced political instability and the kind of extremism manifest in ISIS, the economic, social, and political drivers of conflict demand renewed emphasis on peacebuilding and war prevention.