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COMMENTARY

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Canada's new defence policy

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Amid the white smoke arising from the Sistine Chapel, and the black smoke pouring from the Gomery inquiry, there was little fire generated by the 19 April announcement that the Liberal government would usher a new 'golden age' of Canadian diplomacy, defence, international development, and foreign trade.

A pity, since the product of 16 months of pulling and hauling - within and between at least three federal departments, the prime minister's office, and the parliamentary committees - is arguably the most integrated, even thoughtful, approach to Canada's relations with the rest of the world in recent memory. But the high-mindedness and self-congratulation running through the statement will ring hollow unless theory is followed up by actual practice.

It is difficult to discern where each of the four policies begin and end, which is exactly the point. Foreign affairs, defence, development and trade, are intended to be mutually-reinforcing. The security provided by robust, well-equipped military forces in strife-torn lands opens the door to political reconstruction, which begets economic and social development, which in turn reinforces security. That the government has officially recognized this link - one put forth by academics and non-governmental organizations for years - is encouraging.

Judging from the title of the international policy statement, *A Role of Pride and Influence in the World*, the government's agenda is ambitious. It will expand trade links with emerging powers and mature markets. It will establish a Global Peace and Security Fund, and establish stability and reconstruction task forces (START) to coordinate inter-governmental responses to foreign stabilization efforts. Money set aside explicitly for aid and devel-

opment will be channelled to 25 deserving countries. More diplomats will be recruited, and posted to countries in which Canada wishes to expand commercial and cultural ties.

One would have expected that the defence policy statement, *Setting Our Course*, would have mirrored this new approach, and focus Canada's efforts in a number of specific areas. But despite the \$12.8-billion in additional military spending pledged over the next five years, the Canadian Forces may again find themselves spread thinly across the entire spectrum of military operations.

There is as much continuity from previous defence policies as there is change. The three principal tasks assigned to the Canadian military - the defence of Canada, the defence of North America in co-operation with the United States, and contributions to international security - remain the same. The difference, according to the government, lies in the fact that the threats stem from sub-national terror groups and by political instability in fragile countries, rather than from a monolithic Soviet-type menace.

The relative weight accorded to each principal task will be changed to reflect this new reality. Ottawa has pledged to put more resources into special forces and into a chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological defence unit to counter terror threats at home. It will increase the surveillance of Canadian territory, including the Arctic, using satellites, unmanned air vehicles, and maritime radars. The bulk of the CF-18 fighter fleet will not deploy overseas, but remain at home to patrol the skies. It will all be underwritten by a reformed command structure in which resources from all three services will be brought together to combat terrorism or render assistance to civil authorities.

But the other tasks do not seem to have been relegated to the back burner. Although nothing concrete has been decided, security relations with the US look set to get a

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boost. Deeper co-operation in assuring the security of the continent's maritime approaches may be in the pipeline, along with arrangements to render cross-border assistance to civil authorities. One wonders if Ottawa is not making a virtue out of necessity, recognizing that security collaboration is inevitable, and using the bilateral partnership as a way of leveraging American resources for Canada's purposes.

The federal New Democrats pounced on this as evidence that the government is trading away Canadian sovereignty. This is hard to fathom. If anything, it signals the perpetuation of the 'free-rider' mantra that Canada earned during the 1970s and 1980s. But it is an open question how much influence Canada can have since it will still be operating from a position of material inferiority.

On the international front, Ottawa seems to be setting its sights high. It promises to invest more resources in each 'failed state' (i.e. Haiti, Afghanistan) and to secure command of a part of the operational theatre so as to earn Canada a seat at the table when the diplomats gather to map out strategies for reconstruction.

An extra 5,000 regular force personnel and 3,000 reservists are said to be required in order to satisfy these ambitions. But the claim that they will effectively double Canada's capacity to stabilize failing states belies the defence department's own estimates that it will be able to put two 1,200-person tasks forces into the field simultaneously. The army was able to do this in the Balkans in the early 1990s, so what progress do we really stand to make? How will these 'additional' resources translate into political visibility and influence? Can one even assume that the recruiting and training system will even be able to churn out these forces within the next five years? It seems unlikely, given the fact that for every trained soldier, sailor, or airperson the military must lure five candidates into the recruiting centres.

The lack of specificity on strategic lift casts a shadow over all of Ottawa's plans. How will the special forces or DART personnel be conveyed to where they are needed in an emergency? However grand the plans to reform the command structure or invest in peace-building capacity, nothing happens without sufficient airlift or sealift. The editor of a UK-based defence journal said that having dedicated long-range air transport planes would give Canada 'instant credibility' with its allies and partners in the United Nations. Since Ottawa knows that the pool of aircraft available for charter will shrink due to age, its unwillingness to move ahead with this file is hard to understand.

According to Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Rick Hillier, the intent is to purchase a 'big honkin' ship' to ferry troops and supplies to foreign ports or beachheads. This will likely put paid to any effort to acquire strategic transport aircraft, as the CDS evidently believes that large quantities of people and supplies are best moved by sea. But as Canada has not had an amphibious capability since

D-Day (and that was only temporary) one wonders if the CDS is over-reaching. Should he push to acquire a surplus *San Antonio*-class transporter from the US Navy (complement 800 sailors) he might have to dock several frigates to generate the manpower to sail it. This shift in personnel could diminish our capability to patrol our own coasts. How does this jibe with the 'Canada first' strategy?

The great unspoken truth about Canada's 'new' foreign and defence policy orientation is the way in which it seems intent on transforming not only the physical structure of the Canadian military, but its self-image as well. Although the document speaks of the need to thwart insurgents and warlords, the possibility of being embroiled in a state-versus-state conflict is not entertained. (To wit, only six CF-18s will be deployed for overseas operations, begging the question why the air force should even bother.)

Despite mention of the need for Canadian troops to be prepared for the 'three-block war' (in which combat, peace support, and humanitarian operations take place within a confined geographical space) the term 'combat-capable' is used only sparingly. Canada seems set to maintain just enough punch to scare off incapable adversaries, but not enough to lock horns with anyone substantial. Defence is permissible, but war, at least in its traditional sense, is passé.

The men and women of Canada's armed forces are undoubtedly hoping that the guidance provided to them will stand the test of time. They may rest easy knowing that the authors of the policy statement got many of the strategic issues right. This will boost Defence Minister Bill Graham's confidence that the plan is bullet-proof; that it will enjoy wide parliamentary support and will not be derailed by a possible summer election. Additional hope may lie in the congruence of the defence plan with the foreign affairs and aid strategies articulated by other ministers. An interlocking, multi-departmental strategy is easier to defend than a series of individual plans operating in isolation.

But cabinet will still have to grapple with the perennial question of reconciling Canada's foreign policy activism with its finite human, material, and financial resources. The world may need more Canada, but how much it will get remains to be seen.

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