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Threats to Canada and the “*Canada First* Defence Strategy”

By John Siebert

The quiet release on 19 June 2008 of the 21-page “*Canada First* Defence Strategy” by the Department of National Defence says much about what the current government believes to be the state of the world and how to respond to threats. In keeping with the 2006 Conservative Party election platform, “*Canada First*” describes what are seen as necessary budget increases for Canadian Forces personnel and equipment purchases—some already undertaken—and then projects the budget forward 20 years so that the Defence budget will expand “from approximately \$18 billion in 2008-09, to over \$30 billion by 2027-28” (p. 12).

Canada’s strategic environment

It is self-evident that how a country organizes, funds, and outfits its military is directly related to its understanding of the military threats it faces. “*Canada First*” provides one short page describing our current strategic environment, combining descriptions of international and domestic threats that Canadian Forces must be ready to meet. In the process, “*Canada First*” provokes questions by what it says and doesn’t say about threats and the relative role of the military in this government’s foreign policy.

Any summary of the strategic environment facing Canada should unambiguously start with acknowledging that Canada, post-Cold War, does not face any immediate or even foreseeable military threat to its territorial integrity. No external force is set to attack Canada, including the Taliban-led insurgency that Canada, with others, is currently battling in Afghanistan. For this Canadians should be profoundly grateful. “*Canada First*” does not explicitly make this point but should, if only to remind Canadians that its military exists within the context of a broader foreign policy that, on the point of making friends and limiting enemies, has been remarkably successful.

That doesn’t mean that violent conflicts elsewhere don’t affect us. “*Canada First*” describes the threats that emanate from other states’ wars. We live in a world of “volatility and unpredictability” (p. 6). We are told in “*Canada First*” that Canadians were slow to appreciate why the peace dividend from the end of the Cold War didn’t last long and why the new security challenges of failing states, civil wars, and global terrorism

require that we adjust to new realities, implying the need for substantial new investments in Canadian Forces. How accurate is this reading of the world?

In terms of the number of wars, the world could actually be characterized as a more peaceful place today than it was a decade ago, not more volatile and unpredictable as “Canada First” asserts.

Ways to resolve conflict

It is true that there was an initial spike in the number and intensity of violent conflicts after the end of the Cold War in 1989, but there has actually been a marked decrease in violent conflicts since 1997, from a high of 44 to 30 in 2007 (Project Ploughshares 2008). The recently published *Human Security Brief 2007* (Human Security Report Project 2008) highlights several reasons for the decrease, including the rise in humanitarian assistance going to Africa, the most conflict-ridden continent; negotiated and successfully implemented peace settlements supported by post-conflict reconstruction aid; the increase in the number of Special Representatives of the UN Secretary-General engaged in coordination of international programs and diplomacy; the deployment of over 100,000 peacekeepers to 17 UN missions; and the working together of ad hoc groups of states to help stop wars and prevent them from restarting.

All of these types of multilateral engagement rate barely a mention in “Canada First” and not exactly a ringing endorsement:

These operations will often be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Canada will continue to support and contribute to these key international bodies. (p. 9)

What about the threat of global terrorism that animates, at least in part, our heavy investment in Afghanistan? Here again, *Human Security Brief 2007* has relatively good news. The number of terrorist incidents and victims of those incidents has dramatically decreased since 2004. However, many experts consider that the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have added incentives and opportunities for recruiting terrorists and expanding the number of terrorist attacks. The primary reasons for the decline in terrorism have been such non-military interventions as work by police, intelligence, and financial authorities. A recent Rand study entitled *How Terrorist Groups End* (Jones & Libicki 2008) makes this point in persuasive detail by examining 648 terrorist groups that existed between 1968 and 2006.

“Canada First” identifies a number of sources of insecurity in other countries that lead to violent conflict, the solutions to which have little or no military in the mix. These include unequal access to resources; uneven economic distribution; global criminal networks; and the emergence of new, nuclear-capable adversarial states. Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to point to development assistance, effective diplomacy, and reform of national and international governance rather than military solutions as the logical responses to these threats?

Other threats that concern Canada include human and drug trafficking, the pernicious influence of Islamist militants in key parts of the world, foreign encroachments on Canada’s natural resources, outbreaks of infectious disease, Arctic sovereignty protection, and cyber attacks. It might be asked to what extent Canadians look to the Department of Defence rather than the police, intelligence services, the Coast Guard, and the public health system to provide primary responses.

“Canada First” also highlights the need for the military to provide what is often called “aid to the civil power.” In emergencies the military can bring people, equipment, and highly skilled capabilities to augment civilian capabilities. Floods, forest fires, hurricanes, ice storms, and earthquakes “can overwhelm local capabilities” (p. 6), especially if they are underfunded and poorly coordinated. Hmm. Shouldn’t we first ensure local capabilities are properly funded and coordinated? To be fair, “Canada First” does emphasize the point that the military provides aid to the civil providers, rather than usurping them, but the document’s implied mission creep begins to overwhelm.

“Canada First” falls flat on what motivates Canada to be militarily active in the world when we are not in fact militarily threatened: “As a trading nation in a highly globalized world, Canada’s prosperity and security rely on stability abroad.... Canada must do its part. ... [T]ackling such threats at their source is an important element in protecting Canada” (p. 8). This describes Canadian interests, not its guiding principles in international affairs. The 2006 Conservative Party election platform actually was more expansive on this score. It stated Canada has core values: “freedom, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and free trade—and compassion for the less fortunate—on the international stage.”

Primacy of military power

For the current government, military power seems to be the primary ingredient in the exercise of international power. In “Canada First” we have this statement: “Projecting leadership abroad can take many forms.... One thing is clear, however: Canada cannot lead with words alone. Above all else, leadership requires the ability to deploy military assets, including ‘boots on the ground’” (p. 9). The Prime Minister said as much when applying for his current job: “Right now, the brutal reality is it doesn’t matter to these countries what position Canada takes on these issues because our current government has left the country so weak” (*The Chronicle Herald* 2006).

Others have been more direct. In commenting on the initial oral presentation in May 2008 of “Canada First” by the Prime Minister, David Bercuson (2008, p. A17) from the University of Calgary ridiculed the Harper Government on form: “This is no way to produce—let alone announce—a defence strategy.” But he praised its overall approach to international policy: “The Harper government is the first Canadian government in more than four decades to understand that credible military power is the most important element of diplomacy and that this truism applies as much to Canada as it does to Russia, Britain or the United States.”

Is it true that Canada can only exercise influence in the world if it is backed by military power? Is military power “the most important element of diplomacy”? Many Canadians, as well as many small and mid-size countries, would be surprised if the answer is ‘yes’ to either question.

Roles of other Canadian agencies?

In a great many cases the threats enumerated in “Canada First” will not be counteracted primarily by military power. If this is so, what then are the relative roles of Foreign Affairs in conducting our nation’s diplomacy; of the Canadian International Development Agency in directing official development assistance to address poverty overseas; and of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Public Safety Canada, and the host of other domestic agencies in meeting domestic threats?

It may be that the exigencies faced by a minority Parliament have constrained the government from complementing “Canada First” with strategic papers and long-term budget projections for diplomatic, development, trade, and the other standard components of Canadian foreign policy. In fact, to give the benefit of the doubt, analysis of incremental policy and budget decisions may reveal corresponding and conscious strategic directions being taken by this government in each of these areas.

For the time being, however, “Canada First” stands alone, implying that Bercuson is right about the Conservatives’ view of the primacy of military power in Canada’s foreign relations. If so, based on available evidence, we may want to ask ourselves if this is the best way to meet the domestic or international threats Canada faces, many of which do not have military solutions, or if our money and influence are better concentrated elsewhere.

References

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