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Opinion – Poland’s Territorial Defense Forces: A Solution for Revitalizing Canada’s Reservists

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ZACHARIAH PARCELS, JUN 5 2023

History is unfolding before our eyes as Westphalian sovereignty and the rules-based order, which has preserved relative peace since the culmination of the Second World War, faces overt challenges from revisionist powers. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s unwarranted provocations against Taiwan, along with its expansionism in the South China Sea, have prompted the reconstitution of various militaries worldwide. The post-Cold War “peace dividend,” which permitted actors like Austria and Germany to divert capital away from military expenditures, is over. Now, in tandem with demands for billions for the “green transition,” Western armies with compromised readiness levels are attempting to react to deteriorating global stability. Canada is similarly unprepared. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) remain, after years of mere lip service, undermanned, ill-equipped, and, notably, their Reservists are undertrained. The strain placed on the CAF by Ottawa’s donation of eight Leopard 2 A4 main battle tanks to Ukraine further exemplifies these inadequacies.

The CAF stands as a mere shadow of its former self, falling short of its motto, *Vigilamus pro te* (“We stand on guard for thee”). Yet, amidst these unprecedented times, there might be an equally unprecedented solution, particularly for the CAF Reservists: Poland’s Territorial Defence Forces (TDF; *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*) model. While Russia flexes its proverbial muscles at Poland and occupies portions of Ukraine, Warsaw has devised an innovative and cost-effective means of bolstering its national security. The TDF model, employed successfully in Ukraine, from the defense of Kyiv to the TDF Bratsvo battalion’s involvement in the liberation of Kherson, challenges Thucydides’ historical claim that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” These states have forged robust defenses at a relatively reduced price, demonstrating tactical and strategic innovation against numerically superior adversaries.

So, what is happening in the Great White North? General Wayne Eyre, Canada’s chief of defense staff, recently described how our deteriorating global security situation will generate greater demand from the CAF. Unfortunately, the CAF is unable to meet this call. Despite its funding of \$334.9 million CAD in 2015, the reservists are reportedly experiencing attrition, deploying before they are sufficiently trained and equipped, and lacking clear guidance for both domestic and international missions.

In 2015, the Auditor General of Canada revealed that out of Canada’s 21,000 reservists, only 13,944 were trained and attended unit activities in the last six months. These reservists are meant to supplement regular forces internationally and domestically, respond to emergencies like natural disasters, conduct search and rescue missions, and provide security at events. After a generation of neglect, it is questionable whether they can be relied upon to fulfil these duties.

Poland’s TDF seemingly outperforms CAF reservists in various aspects: they are more cost-effective, maintain a larger mission profile, operate more independently, field more women, and are more accessible. To establish, equip, and operate the TDF in 2017, the Ministry of National Defense spent PLN 879.4 million (\$264.7 million CAD). Comprising both full-time and reserve soldiers, these units are responsible for defending Poland’s territorial integrity, particularly in the event of an invasion. They are designed to operate independently of the Polish military. The TDF also provides assistance to emergency services in crisis management, such as caring for Ukrainian refugees,

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hosting allied soldiers, engaging in counter-hybrid and asymmetric warfare, and promoting Polish values and education.

In 2022, the Polish government allocated PLN 981.9 million (\$304.8 million CAD) for the TDF, supporting a force of 36,000 soldiers, with women comprising 20 percent—surpassing the CAF Reservists’ representation of only 17 percent. This may reflect the TDF’s accessibility. The TDF training structure consists of four stages: basic training, individual training, specialized training, and training to organize TDF subunits. These stages incorporate e-learning components and offer flexibility, allowing for continuous training or weekend-only training. This sharply contrasts with the Canadian reservist experience.

My personal experience with the CAF reservists’ recruitment was riddled with delays and frustration. It culminated in a commanding officer dismissing the usefulness of reservist intelligence officers and my higher education in security studies. These challenges discourage potential reservists, compounded by the full-time 10-week basic training program and the months-long specialization courses that can take individuals thousands of kilometers away from their families, friends, and jobs—an impossible time commitment. Revamping the reservist program is not only crucial for national security but also self-evident.

While Canada may inevitably incur higher wage costs than Poland or Ukraine in implementing the TDF model, the Polish TDF offers additional incentives, such as untaxed earnings and equalized daily salaries with a soldier’s day job—perks not offered by Ottawa. Therefore, the CAF could address particularly its inadequate accessibility by adopting the TDF’s lucrative financial incentives, localized training and deployment, and e-learning and flexible training options. Establishing a territorial defense force would provide Canadians with an opportunity to serve closer to home, bolster Canada’s defensive posture, and reaffirm its position in NATO.

The spending disparities between the Polish TDF and CAF reservists may also stem from a lack of government transparency and downward accountability. The last public audit disclosing CAF reservist spending took place in 2015. Public audits play a crucial role in upholding the state’s accountability and fostering trust in democratic governance. An overhaul could increase downward accountability and, thus, result in Canadian taxpayers witnessing better and more transparent returns on their security investments.

The TDF model helps ameliorate Canada’s inherent numerical disadvantage when confronting revisionist adversaries such as China and addresses the issue of inadequate training, thus potentially augmenting its battlefield effectiveness. Emulating Taiwan’s renowned “porcupine strategy,” which relies on the concept of “a large number of small things,” Canada has the opportunity to deploy a nimble and decentralized force to complement its allied Regulars. Grenade launchers, anti-armor weapons, and command-detonated explosives, alongside other indispensable tools, constitute the bedrock of this strategy. These “small things,” particularly the Javelin anti-tank missile system, have already played a pivotal role in Ukraine’s successes against formidable Russian armored divisions. Under the current model, Canadian non-commissioned reservists receive no training in these small arms. Reportedly, many are not even proficient in operating pistols.

Canada is not back. Ottawa, right now, is facing a watershed moment. Amidst all these challenges – from ominous Chinese spy balloons to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, will Canadian taxpayers start seeing better and more transparent returns on their defense investments? Establishing a territorial defense force could mark the beginning of Canada reclaiming its international status. Canada would rejoin its partners in rebuffing hybridized threats from revisionist powers and restore waning public trust in its government institutions.

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