

Opinion – Canada's Armed Forces: On the Brink?

Written by David Wright

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DAVID WRIGHT, NOV 14 2024

There is a general consensus across the Canadian political class that the condition of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is dire. The situation is clear: without a long-term political resurgence and a concerted national effort to rebuild its military, the country risks a permanent decline in defence capabilities, which would severely limit its influence in global geopolitical affairs. It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that a country with such economic stature (as of 2024, Canada is ranked the world's 9th or 10th largest economy, depending on the source), whose prosperity relies heavily on international trade and the stability of global systems, risks a decline in defence capabilities. Canada's economy is highly interconnected with the global market, and maintaining a stable international environment is crucial for sustaining and developing these trade relationships. A reduction in defence readiness could undermine its ability to contribute to and benefit from the global order that sustains its economic prosperity.

Unfortunately, in spite of these geopolitical needs, there are incremental deficiencies in the structure and capabilities of the CAF which go beyond mere funding issues. The NATO target of 2 per cent of GDP on military spending cannot alone resolve these structural crises, and with almost half of Canadian military equipment "unserviceable", according to a Department of National Defence report, the country's allies are aware that they cannot count on Canadian military support for the foreseeable future.

According to Canadian Defence Minister Bill Blair, government constraint on defence spending has led to a "death spiral" in recruitment, and the country's unreadiness in the facing of the changing dynamics of modern warfare have left it vulnerable. "The first responsibility of any government is the national defence of its country, and we simply have to do more in defending Canada's interests around the world because the nature of warfare is changing," he added:

Our potential hostile adversaries are investing in capabilities to threaten us, and the best way to respond to that risk is to be prepared and to build resilience and preparedness. As I said, increased production is deterrence, being prepared is deterrence.

On paper, the situation appears critical. The CAF is short at least 16,000 personnel— around 15 per cent of their authorised strength of 71,500 regular forces and 30,000 primary reserve forces. The aforementioned DND report's findings are highly concerning: on average, only 45 per cent of Canada's air force fleet is operational, while the Royal Canadian Navy can operate at 46 per cent of its capacity and the army at 54 per cent. This crisis stems from a combination of factors, including the declining appeal of military careers, recent sexual misconduct scandals, and both direct and indirect violations of the laws of armed conflict during operations in Afghanistan. Finding political solutions to these issues could take decades.

These alarming numbers underline how Canada is trailing its allies at a time of severe geopolitical instability and the threat of armed conflict in a number of global theatres. "While Canada sleeps" as one NATO ambassador put it, our allies prepare for the contingencies of future warfare while dealing with gray-zone conflict. Tired of our promises and preaching, they see our 2 percent announcement during the NATO 75th anniversary summit in Washington for what it is: improvised damage control with no real commitment," writes Colin Robertson in the Canadian Politics and Public Policy magazine.

One could deduce that this is a sign of national apathy, possibly linked to the fact that Canada has never experienced

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foreign war on its own soil since it became an independent state in 1867. However, polls indicate that public interest in the issue has been growing in recent years, particularly in light of global geopolitical tensions. A 2023 Ipsos poll found that 75% of Canadians believe that defence spending should increase to ensure the country can protect its territory and sovereignty.

This shift in attitude seems driven by concerns over international events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine (cited by 71% of respondents) and China's assertive actions in the Taiwan Strait (69%). Despite this, many Canadians remain critical of the state of the Canadian Armed Forces, with 56% describing it as "old and antiquated."

While the hypothesis of geopolitical self-destruction through denial of reality cannot be completely dismissed, until proven otherwise, it is important for Canadian decision-makers to focus on identifying and addressing the nation's pressing needs in defence. Several Canadian experts have already taken steps in this direction, proposing a defence model that prioritises air and naval capabilities, specifically in light of Canada's Arctic territories and its maritime borders, which face potential threats from Russia and China.

"Climate change is rapidly reshaping Canada and reshaping our North," said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a televised news conference from Canadian Forces Base Trenton, Ontario, back in April. A new approach was outlined in Canada's updated defence policy, *Our North, Strong and Free* that same month, which emphasises investments in Arctic defence as a response to growing security risks in the region. "Our Arctic is now warming at four times the global average, making a vast and sensitive region more accessible to foreign actors who have growing capabilities and regional military ambitions," the document outlines.

This strategic shift gains even more legitimacy when considering the expectations of Canada's powerful neighbour, the United States, which relies on Canada to fulfil its responsibilities within NORAD. But the country has barely more than a dozen operational fighter jets available for immediate response, only three to four aging frigates that can be deployed at a time, and a single, outdated submarine. Multiple sources, including the experts referenced earlier, confirm this dire reality. In addition to NORAD obligations, Canada must also contribute to NATO, an alliance that has undergone significant recalibration following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite its Enhanced Forward Presence agreement with Latvia, NATO allies are acutely aware of the current unreliability of Canadian strategic military response structures.

The current state of Canada's Air and Navy plans, particularly the Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) program (eFP), addresses some of the aforementioned critical defence needs but is fraught with significant delays. The Royal Canadian Navy is in the process of constructing 15 River-class destroyers to replace its aging Halifax-class frigates and Iroquois-class destroyers. The first of these ships is not expected to enter service until the mid-2030s, with the final ship slated for completion around 2050. This timeline has raised concerns about the Navy's ability to maintain operational readiness during the interim period.

Regarding the Canadian Army (CA), the likelihood of large-scale ground operations on Canadian soil remains extremely low. Any such operations in the next 10-15 years would most likely involve Russia, occurring around 6,000-7,000 kilometres from Canada (e.g., the 6,500 km distance from Ottawa to Riga, referencing the Enhanced Forward Presence mission in Latvia). Consequently, the focus should be on maintaining an expeditionary force with a manageable logistical and maintenance footprint, incorporating key lessons from the conflict in the Donbas. These lessons include finding the right balance between mobility and protection (both active and passive) and firepower, the widespread use of drones and loitering munitions, the need for robust defensive and offensive cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, and the critical role of indirect fire, which has proven to be the leading cause of casualties on both sides.

For example, operational feedback highlights the vulnerability of M777 towed artillery systems deployed to Latvia in 2022, while heavily armoured and tracked systems present their own challenges. In addition to focusing on artillery, the Canadian Army (CA), which is unlikely to receive budgetary priority due to its emphasis on the Far North, will need to pursue solutions that offer optimal cost control. This approach would involve adopting "controlled sophistication"—the development of systems that are advanced enough to match likely adversaries but come with a

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unit cost that allows for the acquisition of a significantly larger quantity of systems within a given budget. Building mass would provide greater resilience to the attrition typical of high-intensity warfare, a critical factor for strategic success that Western armies have largely overlooked in recent decades.

About the author:

David Wright trained as a robotics engineer, before spending several years in this field with European companies as a project manager. He subsequently worked on a range of international projects in the defence sector.