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The Canadian Army in a Changing North American Defence and Security Environment

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This short reflection, which formed the basis for a brief presentation to the Strategic Army Leadership Symposium this month, reflects on three points:

1. where the Army fits in North American defence and NORAD modernization;
2. why destabilizing issues such as climate change, political and social polarization, and extremism mean that the Army must be adaptable and responsive to emerging threats to and within our continent; and
3. how/why to pursue ideas for enhanced, constructive engagement with Indigenous peoples

The discussions about North American defence modernization to date strike me as heavily focused on NORAD modernization (and too much on the future of the North Warning System in particular), and typically emphasize how we must better integrate technology to detect, deter, and defeat threats in the space, cyber, air, maritime, and cognitive domains. We might note that the Army is conspicuously sidelined in most of these public discussions.

The emerging architecture for North American defence – like [US NORTHCOM and NORAD's SHIELD \(the Strategic Homeland Integrated Ecosystem for Layered Defense\)](#) – is all-domain, spanning “sea floor to orbit,” and is at its core about using the latest advances in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning to analyze patterns, anticipate moves, and enable decision-making superiority. Many aspects of JADC2 (Joint All-Domain Command and Control) and other systems also have direct applications and implications for the Canadian Army – obviously in terms of command, control, and communications, and connecting sensors to shooters. There are interesting opportunities to conceptualize how land forces (Army systems, vehicle fleets, and even individual soldiers) will fit within the broader networked and integrated layered defence ecosystem of sensors, fusion elements, and defeat mechanisms.

To elevate back to strategic concepts, as deterrence-by-punishment seems decreasingly sufficient as a response in a world of more complex and multi-dimensional threats, then what role should the Canadian Army play in deterrence-by-denial and defensive operations in North America? In a continental defence construct, I do not see defence primarily about deterring great powers from attacking our homeland with large land forces. Nor are North American conventional land forces usually factored in as an initial phase of strategic-level military engagements, especially when fulfilling operational sustainability requirements. Instead, I think that DND's [*Close Engagement: Land Power in an Age of Uncertainty*](#) touches on the essential elements for responding to a changing continental threat environment, including:

- fostering the culture and tools that enable interoperability with partners;
- agile and adaptive formations that can be created to respond to different scales and forms of threats in and to North America – usually posed by non-state actors or proxies; and
- resilient and robust networks that can feed, receive, and fuse information up, down, and across, at the speed of relevance.

The sectors of security from Buzan all have separate and overlapping implications for North American defense, including military, political, economic, social, and environmental. The national security responsibilities involving the Canadian Army may require that thinking and capabilities gravitate increasingly toward domestic, non-hard-security challenges. Rather than contemplating scenarios of Russian forces occupying Graham Island, or Chinese scientists hunkering down on Prince Patrick Island, I am more worried about an adversary bringing down a remote region's diesel-electric generating systems from afar, causing a human crisis that requires a massive government response including the Army, sowing seeds of distrust in the Canadian government's ability to protect its citizens, and diverting our attention and resources from elsewhere in the world – and thus opening up freedom of manoeuvre for our adversaries. What we have already seen in terms of hybrid warfare and grey zone tactics is but a small harbinger of what we may see in the years ahead.

In terms of North American defence writ large and what NORAD is envisaging, I share my colleague [Dr. Andrea Charron's worries](#) that this might be a lot for the government and the Canadian public to digest right now – particularly with it being the unwritten and un-costed chapter in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* and with COVID leaving us in an uncertain economic state. Dr. Charron also suggests that focusing back to symmetric threat challenges and major power competition shifts attention away from other persistent threats, like climate change (which accounts for a significant percentage of Canadian Joint Operations Command missions) and asymmetric threats to North America.

The Army is already thinking beyond traditional service and level-one stovepipes and discerning possible new roles in the cyber and cognitive domains – this is important, and I think that it will require challenging some deeply entrenched assumptions about who the Army needs to recruit, and the balance between different forms of service and a culture of universality of service. This is a topic on many senior leaders' agendas – and I anticipate that this will increasingly be the case.

My second point is about destabilizing factors that require adaptiveness, agility, and readiness for a whole range of contingencies.

First, we should avoid conceptualizing or depicting climate change as an Arctic issue – it is a pan-Canadian and a global issue, and future continental defence planning will have to contemplate massive disaster relief efforts that draw resources from across our North American borders.

We also cannot lose sight of asymmetric threats can come from outside, and from within. We will soon mark the 50th anniversary of the October Crisis – and regardless of what the recent film *Les Roses* might suggest, there was nothing redeeming about the Front de liberation du Québec (FLQ). We need to be prepared to deal with [terrorism in its many forms](#).

I also worry that as Canadians and North Americans grow increasingly frustrated with inextricable tensions between our economic system and climate change (as we see in disputes over pipelines) and try to overcome persistent inequalities, consensus will be more difficult to achieve – and the risks for internal conflict more acute. Scenarios involving eco-terrorists are examples of this and, given how much of our critical infrastructure is linked to the United States, we must see this as a [continental defence and security issue](#).

Furthermore, the roles that the Army are called upon to play in an assistant-to-civil-authority capacity affirm, first and foremost, that Canadians must see the Canadian Army as a credible. Canadians must believe that it reflects and embodies Canadian values, both as an institution and as a group of individuals. This makes [Lieutenant-General Wayne Eyre's commitment](#) to ensure that the Canadian Army is not misperceived as a bastion for far-right extremists – or extremists of any ideological stripe – absolutely essential. This is important domestically, and it is also vital continentally.

We face a world of increasing political polarization and of threats to social cohesion that is increasingly aided and abetted by foreign adversaries seeking to divide our societies and undermine our democracy. Canadians' self-image of tolerance and diversity is a strong buttress against this, but we cannot become complacent. We are vulnerable to disaffection and misinformation campaign by our adversaries designed to exacerbate divisions and create crises. The Canadian Army is wise to devise more creative ways to leverage Canadian diversity and engage (in the sense of gaining understanding and coordinating activities with partners) with a wider breadth of groups and communities in Canada.

The current focus on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples is a strong example. This month, we mark the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Oka Crisis – a scenario in which the Canadian Army was called upon to carry the ["burden of peace"](#) in a very volatile situation. This was a turning point in modern Canadian history. When I think of Indigenous-military relations in Canada, however, my mind does not turn to that first. I think of the thousands of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit soldiers who have [proudly served in Canadian uniforms since the First World War](#), and continue to do so today.

I also think of all of the Canadian Rangers – not as symbols of sovereignty, but in terms of the practical capability that they bring as critical enablers for operations in isolated Northern and coastal communities. As we [contemplate layered systems for North American defence](#), we cannot get so caught up in engineering technological solutions that we lose sight of how we can better leverage the existing, human sensors that we have across the country – and the distinct capabilities that they bring to responding.

To speak to General Eyre’s role as the Indigenous champion within the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, I always marvel at how the Army is seen as a positive, constructive force in remote Canadian communities – largely because of the Rangers and relationships with the Ranger Instructors who train them, as well as with the various army elements that have exercised in the North.

How can the Canadian Army do more to support Whole-of-Government engagement with Indigenous communities and address wedges that can be exploited by adversaries? First, it is important to recognize that Indigenous peoples have a lot of security-related capacity. Not everyone will want to serve in a military uniform, but the Army should consider opportunities to support and train with [Indigenous Guardian programs and other organizations](#) who also serve as eyes and ears in Indigenous homelands, and can be valuable partners in discerning certain threats in and to North America.

Furthermore, we should really *listen* to what communities want and need, and think about how domestic Army activities might help to address infrastructure and training deficits. We might look to the [Australians and Americans for examples](#). Although an increased domestic role for the Canadian Army might be in opposition of national security readiness requirements, climate change is forcing the issue on all belligerents. The principles from both *jus ad bellum* as well as *jus in bello* are likely to change the global tolerance for violent adversarial exploits. The threats are changing, and the Canadian Army must be enabled and empowered to adapt to the shifting circumstances.

At the same time, we should build better mechanisms to not only inform Indigenous leaders at all levels about emerging threats, but also to learn their ideas about how we might detect and counter malicious actors.

My final point is simple: you cannot “surge” trust – it needs to be built over time. When the Army goes into Indigenous communities, personnel should know the names of the people from those particular places who have served, and explicitly honour their contributions and sacrifices. This is a powerful and appropriate way of invoking the past to enhance present relationships and co-create a better future.

So, when thinking about how the future land operating environment flows into continental defence, there is not question that it will be complex and dynamic. Volatile? Perhaps not in the conventional sense, but yes. And highly uncertain – well, that is certain...

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