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Contemporary Strategic Trends and the Canadian Army

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I have been asked to give my thoughts on "where I see the Canadian Army going in the next five years or so." The topic is a particularly timely one. There are dramatic changes underway in the world today, both at the strategic level involving global politics and at the operational and tactical levels involving the specific character of military operations. In addition, in June 2017 the government released its long awaited defence policy statement, *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, designed to guide the future evolution of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Its promises, which are very ambitious, will inevitably impact the Canadian Army in the not too distant future.

Over the next few minutes, I'll outline some strategic drivers that are likely to shape the international environment over the next few years. Then I'll talk about likely Canadian Armed Forces and army missions in response to this environment, before discussing some specific force changes and characteristics we can expect to see, and drawing overall conclusions.

Strategic Drivers

Great Power Competition and the Potential for Major Conventional War

After a quarter century hiatus, great power competition has returned to the international system. The evolving balance of power is the first strategic trend highlighted in SSE. An easy benchmark is Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, but in

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fact a shift has been under way for some time. Russia is arguably a declining power, especially when we consider its demographics and shrinking population. Yet it is also a heavily armed nuclear power. Since the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, Russia has done much to reform and modernize its conventional military capabilities. Critically, the country has moved from the ranks of being a "status quo" to a "revisionist" power. Russia is not happy with its place in the international system and it seeks to reassert itself as a great power. Western nations are especially concerned about Russia's intentions in the Baltics, given its track record in Georgia and Crimea and its intensifying military activity along NATO's eastern front.

Meanwhile, China has been growing economically for years and for the past decade or more has been pursing military capabilities commensurate with its great power status. Tension in the Asia Pacific is rising because of overt disputes between China and other regional actors, most of whom are allied with the United States. As a rising power, it is inevitable China will contest the pre-existing US-led order in the Asia Pacific. The unanswered question is whether the power transition can be done peacefully or if it will involve open conflict. Rather than a direct face-off between China and the US, it more likely that a smaller conflict in the region could escalate to include US involvement.[1]

The most immediate issue is what will happen on the Korean peninsula. We read the headlines every day about North Korea's growing nuclear and missile capability. Underappreciated, perhaps, is the prospect of a major conventional war on the Korean peninsula. The US Army is thought to assess such a possibility at greater than 50% in the short to medium term. Indeed, notwithstanding what is happening in Europe, America's Army is focusing almost all its war gaming on the prospect of a conventional war on the North Korean peninsula, and Secretary Mattis has recently stated America must prepare for war in Korea.

Many dismiss the possibility of major conventional war because it would be economic suicide on all sides and because of the existence of nuclear weapons. But the US Army Vision statement of 2015 has a different perspective on the constraining forces of interdependence and nuclear weapons. It argues that because states today are

[1] See Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013).

inextricably intertwined in the international system, they seek to avoid direct military action. Instead, to achieve their goals, aggressive powers are applying all elements of national power—military, diplomatic, economic, cyber and informational—in creative ways. This very complexity, across multiple domains of activity, is raising the possibility of miscalculation and with it the "likelihood of conventional interstate war, *in spite of existing nuclear deterrents*" (emphases added).[2]

Great Power Competition and Hybrid War

An important sub-theme is great power competition and hybrid war. Beginning with its invasion of Crimea and continuing in both the Ukrainian and Baltic theatres, Russia has pursued what the West characterizes as hybrid war or "grey zone strategies." Hybrid war refers to campaigns that involve some combination of: conventional forces, irregular forces or proxies, high-tech and low-tech weaponry, information operations, cyber capabilities, espionage, and political and economic influence.[3] We have heard much about the irregular forces working with Russian troops in Crimea, Ukraine and Eastern Europe. According to the US Director of National Intelligence, Russia is also a "full scope cyber actor" with an aggressive offensive cyber posture.[4] Like Russia, *China* has invested in extensive cyberwar capabilities. It also engages in hybrid activities in the maritime domain: a large and growing number of small fishing boats and cargo vessels appear to be operating as a "maritime militia" working in coordination with the Chinese Coast Guard and Navy.[5]

Hybrid war, scholars are quick to point out, is not new. The term "hybrid" simply denotes the combination of previously defined types of war—conventional, irregular or information—and the idea of combining war across domains "is as old as

[2] US Army, *The Army Vision: Strategic Advantage in a Complex World* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2015), pp. 5-6.
[3] Christopher Chivvis (RAND Corporation), "Understanding Russian 'Hybrid Warfare' and What Can be Done about It," *Testimony Before the US House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services*, Washington, D.C., 22 March 2017, pp. 3-4.
[4] Daniel R. Coats, Director of National Intelligence, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 11 May 2017, p. 1.
[5] Christopher Cavas, "Time to Call out China's Maritime Militia?" *Defense News*, 19 September 2016.

warfare itself." [6] In this particular era, the development and pursuit of hybrid capabilities by some powers is driven by the conventional superiority of the United States. Countries know they cannot compete head on with the United States in the conventional arena and so they are pursuing asymmetric strategies such as hybrid war. Adversary hybrid tactics have to be incorporated into friendly war planning not only because the tactics need to be countered, but also because as they become more acute they can easily cross over into conventional combat operations.[7] Already, for example, scholars are recommending the West shift its perceptual lens from Russia's hybrid tactics to its growing conventional warfighting capacity.[8]

Non-State Actors and Intrastate War

So far, I have focused on strategic trends leading to the growing potential for major conventional war. But *intra* state wars will continue to occupy our attention. Indeed, the most recent US Army Strategy sees challenges to the existing international order of states as accelerating—due to the growing power and influence of non-state actors.[9] It expects that most conflicts of the future will be in the massive urban environments of the mega cities that increasingly populate failed and failing states. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* highlights conflicts triggered by population growth, large-scale migration from rural to urban areas, and the resultant competition for resources.

There is a whole basket of possible military responses for addressing conflict within states. They range from defence capacity building and stability missions, to traditional peacekeeping, to more robust peace support and counterinsurgency operations. Counterinsurgency, peace support, peacekeeping, and stability missions are familiar terms. But "defence capacity building," is a relatively new concept. It refers to anything from giving advice on security sector reform, to developing local armed forces (through training and education), to helping out on cyber defence and logistics. The

[6] Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, *A Closer Look as Russia's 'Hybrid War'* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Kennan Institute, Kennan Cable No. 7, April 2015). https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no7-closer-look-russias-hybrid-war accessed 9 September 2017.
[7] Chivvis, "Understanding," p. 2.
[8] Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2-16): p. 66.
[9] US Army, *The Army Vision*, p. 4.

idea is preventative in nature. The goal is to "project stability" by enabling countries to address security concerns on their own, thereby reducing the need for Western—read NATO—crisis management operations.

Likely Missions

Hybrid war, intrastate conflict, and, especially, the return of great power and state-based competition, are the major strategic challenges of the immediate future. The question is, "Where does the Canadian Army fit in all of this?" *Strong, Secure, Engaged* lists eight core missions of the Canadian Armed Forces, which basically boil down to the defence of Canada, the defence of North America in conjunction with the United States, deterring and defeating adversaries as part of NATO, and contributing to peace operations through NATO or the UN.

I do not have a crystal ball on where the Canadian Army is going to go in a physical sense over the next five years, but let me just throw out likelihoods in terms of types of missions. The Army, and especially units like the Rangers and the Arctic Response Company Groups, will play continuing and perhaps growing "defence of Canada" roles as the Arctic becomes more accessible. There will also no doubt be natural disasters here in Canada requiring assistance to civil authorities. But most of the army's activity will be expeditionary in nature, as has always been the case. That is, it will pertain to NATO, the UN and coalition missions abroad.

Conventional War

In the state-to-state realm, if there were major conventional war in Europe in the coming years the Canadian Army would be directly involved. Canada is already leading a battalion group in Latvia. Our 450 troops are joined by forces from five other NATO countries to make up a multinational battle group. Our deployment includes a

unit of "cyber warriors," charged with the mission of defending against attempts to hack into military networks and countering Russian disinformation.[10]

Canada might expect additional manpower demands in the *European* theatre in the event of circumstances that somehow require a larger deterrent force; in the event of actual hostilities in the Baltics; *or* in the event of conventional war on the Korean peninsula. Let me explain this last point. I think it is relatively unlikely Canada would take part in a massive conventional military operation in Korea. Any small contribution we could make would be lost in a sea of US soldiers, bringing little military or political benefit—unless the US wants as many 'flags' as possible to demonstrate international resolution. But it *is* possible Canada could be asked to concretely step up its contribution in Europe in the context of "global burden sharing," thereby enabling the US to focus more on the Korean peninsula. Moreover, this is something to which the current government would likely agree. Our army leaders stress that the Canadian contribution to Op Reassurance in the Baltics is highly valued by our allies and is a place the Canadian Army can truly make a difference.[11]

Peace support

The Canadian role in addressing intrastate conflict is less clear cut. SSE signals its support for peace support missions, but sticks to non-committal terms. It says that today's missions are complex, and that international forces often operate in active war zones, tasked with using force to protect populations—a statement that would have been equally accurate in the mid-1990s. It says Canada can best provide specialized capabilities and expertise. There is no mention of the peacekeeping mission that was promised back in the summer of 2016.

Right now, we await the outcome of the peacekeeping conference in Vancouver in November to see what the government's plans are with respect to peacekeeping. I will not make any predictions in that regard, but I will say three things. First, I do not

[10] Matthew Fisher, "Canada's Forces Deployed in Latvia to Include 'Cyber Warriors' to Counter Russians," *National Post*, 9 March 2017.
[11] Author interview with Lieutenant General Paul Wynnyk, Commander of the Canadian Army, 27 September 2017.

expect Canada to engage in another COIN operation any time soon. The term "counterinsurgency" does not even appear in *Strong, Secure, Engaged*. I would equate the Trudeau government's emphatic statement that Canada will not be going back to Afghanistan to saying that we will not engage in counterinsurgency. Second, to the extent we do commit to a peace support operation it will be in the form of critical enablers like signals, military engineers, intelligence, strategic lift, etc. In other words, the "specialized capabilities" statement of the SSE is indicative of any future commitment.[12]

Third, the CAF and the army in particular will be increasingly involved in defence capacity building measures. This concept actually figures as one of the CAF's eight core missions—the only truly new mission in the SSE as compared to the 2008 Canada First Defence Strategy. The SSE stresses the need not just to respond to conflict but also to prevent it in the first place. And finding preventive conflict strategies was a big part of the public consultations in the lead up to the SSE. Already, as a concrete example, we see soldiers from the first battalion Van Doos taking over from CSOR to train the Niger Armed Forces in a range of military skills.

Force Characteristics

I have scoped out some key strategic trends and, in broad terms, the sorts of missions in which the Canadian army is likely to take part. Let me turn now to what this might mean for the army at the tactical and operational levels over the next five years or so.

What You See is What You Get

My first point is that "what you see is what you get." When it comes to equipment, those platforms already in the acquisition system are what the army will have in five years' time. Major platforms include the LAV VI, upgraded Leopard tanks,

[12] Editorial note: at the November 2017 peacekeeping conference in Vancouver Canada committed to "smart pledges" of specialized capabilities like airlift and helicopters. Consistent with this, in March 2018 it announced Canada would be sending Chinook and Griffin helicopters to Mali.

and tactical armored patrol vehicles. The army is also exploring a light, very high-mobility all-terrain vehicle (the Polaris MRZR4), that would increase the operational capacity of its new light battalions that I will talk about in a minute.

Some Important SSE Commitments

That said, there will be some new things. SSE commits to a number of important equipment investments for the Army. First on the list is ground based air defence systems, something the Army has highlighted for several years but can now be expected to move forward. This acquisition reflects the fact that while for the past quarter century or so Western armies have operated in an environment where we have air superiority, that is now changing. As major conventional war grows in likelihood, and as airborne technologies spread to non-state actors, Western armies have to once again think about air defence. One journal article put it this way: "In future…ground forces cannot count on air superiority…This means that gaining access to areas of operation, conducting expeditionary maneuvres, and defending ground units" will be much more challenging than in the recent past.[13]

The SSE also prioritizes investments in the army's command, control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems. Projects pertaining to C4ISR were already on the books[14] but as a result of SSE they are now being prioritized. The idea is to link soldiers together so that they are in constant communication and have common situational awareness, even as they operate on a very dispersed battlefield. As part of this the integrated soldier system project is progressing. This project is delivering real-time blue force tracking networked capabilities to infantry platoons and companies.[15]

[13] John R. Benedict, Jr., "Global Power Distribution and Warfighting in the 21st Century," *Joint Force Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2016): p. 9.
[14] Land Command Support System Tactical Command and Control and Information System modernization project & Land Command Support System Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance modernization project.
[15] DND and CAF *Departmental Plan 2017-18*, p. 29.

Adaptive Dispersed Operations in Evolved Form

Army investments in networked connectedness and common situational awareness is linked to a concept that it first promulgated a decade ago. Adaptive Dispersed Operations, or ADO, was the core of a land operations vision document released in 2007 that looked to 2021 and beyond—the "Army of Tomorrow." The document defined ADO as "adapted, networked, and integrated forces alternatively dispersing and aggregating throughout the multi-dimensional battlespace."[16] The vision was—and is—to create a persistent information network that links soldiers, sensors (e.g. UAVs), combat platforms and commanders.[17] ADO is most directly applicable to maneuver warfare, but it is also meant to be applied across the full spectrum of conflict.[18]

The Achilles heel to all of this will be the dependence on technological connectedness. Technology creates vulnerabilities. Peer competitors have the resources and skills to wage cyberwar. For the Army to be able to retain the inherent advantage of a networked combat force it will need to be able to defend its systems from aggressive adversary cyberattacks that are conducted as part of a hybrid warfare campaign.

Cyber

Not surprisingly, SSE includes an important emphasis on cyber capabilities. SSE announces the CAF is creating a new Cyber Operator occupation. Of the 3,500 new positions promised for the regular force, the vast majority is to go to enablers like cyber, C4ISR and intelligence. The cyber focus will also have direct implications for Canada's reserve. SSE specifically foresees reservists with pre-existing and specialized skills filling elements of the CAF cyber forces. The future CAF cyber requirement writ large is for cyber capabilities to counter hybrid warfare tactics; "traditional" defensive cyber

[16] Directorate of Land Concepts and Design, *Land Operations 2021: Adaptive Dispersed Operations, the Force Employment Concept for Canada's Army of Tomorrow* (Kingston, ON: Department of National Defence, 2007), p. 11.
[17] Canadian Army, *Waypoint 2018: The Canadian Army Advancing Toward Land Operations 2021* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2015), p. 7.
[18] Ibid.

operations; and, notably, offensive cyber operations. These were just authorized for the CAF for the first time ever in SSE (the US made the doctrinal shift about a decade and a half ago).

Army Reserves

Over the next five years I anticipate significant changes in the Canadian army reserves. SSE announces Canada will increase the size of the reserves by 1,500 people, with 900 of these positions to go to the army. To help fill the ranks, the hiring process has been decentralized from Chief Military Personnel to the unit level as of last April. The hope is that this will enable new reserve members to be processed within 4 or 5 weeks of walking in the door, as opposed to the previous average of 7 or 8 months. A 2016 Report of the Auditor General found that army reserve units lacked clear guidance on preparing for major international missions.

A new vision for the reserves thus figures centrally in SSE. Over the next year or two each army reserve unit is to be given a specific mission, and steps are to be taken to provide the unit with the necessary equipment to carry out the assigned mission. The idea is to create fully formed, task-tailored units that can be integrated into the regular forces. This might be a mortar or pioneer platoon, or one centered on the 50 Cal machine gun. If, for example, a mortar platoon is needed in Latvia, the army wants to be able to send a formed reserve unit that would then be integrated into the regular force deployment.

Training for Conventional War

In the immediate future army *training* will focus relatively more on major conventional war than it has in the past decade.[19] SSE indicates this imperative when it states explicitly that the army trains to fight at the brigade group level and that this is the minimum level at which it is possible to execute joint campaigns. Because counterinsurgency was our army's focus throughout most of the 2000s there is, to

[19] Author interview with Major General Simon Hetherington, Commander Canadian Training and Doctrine Command, 13 September 2017.

certain degree, a skills deficit up to the senior NCO level. A former commander of the Army has said "There is a whole generation of soldiers that are really good at counterinsurgency [and] They need to be broadened to understand the other elements of fighting a near-peer enemy…"[20]

Skills to address *intra*state conflict are still important, but they must be buttressed with relearning the state-on-state skill set. In counterinsurgency, for example, troops conduct missions from a Forward Operating Base, returning every night. I am sure many in this audience have been part of such operations. In major conventional war troops remain in the field for an extended time; there is no FOB to which to return every night. The necessary changes in training will be reflected in unit training throughout the year and at exercise Maple Resolve in Wainwright each spring. Our mission in Latvia is also described as a giant and ongoing conventional war training mission.

Light Infantry Battalions – Regular Force

Structurally within the Canadian army an important change underway is a shift from three mechanized battalions within each regular force brigade, to two mechanized and one light battalion. Thus 3 PPCLI, 3 RCR and 3 Van Doos are all becoming light battalions "by design." I say by design because in the past it was often the case that some of our battalions were lighter than we wanted them to be for lack of equipment. But operations over the past decade or so demonstrated there was an actual *need* for light infantry battalions.[21] The army is operating more in the grey zones with our special operations forces, and in some cases is taking over missions previously run by SOF (the mission mentioned earlier in Niger).

[20] Lieutenant-General (retired) Peter Devlin, then Commander of the Canadian Army, as quoted in "Reloaded: Positioning the Army for 2021," *Vanguard Magazine*, 19 February 2013. www.vanguardcanada.com
accessed 21 August 2017

[21] Author interview with Brigadier General Derek Macauley, Chief of Staff Army Strategy, 26 September 2017.

The theme here is growing Army partnership with CANSOFCOM in a complementary role. The light battalions will operate conceptually and doctrinally between the tier 2 Canadian Special Operations Regiment and our mechanized battalions, and will be rapidly deployable by air, land or sea. Most likely scenarios involve peace support operations. SSE captures this change when it states the army "will expand its light forces capability which will allow it to be more agile and effective in complex operational theatres, such as peace operations."

Robotics?

A final force characteristic I want to mention pertains to automation. Over the next five years the army is likely to incorporate autonomous vehicles into its training, if not its actual operations. Unmanned aerial vehicles, of course, are the original military robots. But advances are also being made in unmanned ground vehicles. The 2014 Canadian Army strategy, *Advancing with Purpose* (3rd edition), says the army of tomorrow might include "unattended ground sensors and other autonomous and semi-autonomous systems."[22]

SSE reinforces this. It states remotely 'piloted' ground systems, such as bomb disposal robots, offer great potential in helping Canada meet its defence needs by removing humans from dangerous situations, and permitting operations in severe and inhospitable environments. The international community as a whole is grappling with ethical considerations over what is the appropriate level of human involvement in the use of military capabilities that can exert lethal force. Nonetheless, in the not too distant future I think we will see unmanned ground vehicles for certain roles integrated into Canadian army operations, such as replacing traditional supply convoys with trains of semi-autonomous robot vehicles.

[22] Canadian Army, *Advancing with Purpose: The Army Strategy*, 3rd edition (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2014), p. 15.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying the world of the 2020s will not be the world of the 2000s. The strategic challenge of intrastate warfare will continue but we will be increasingly preoccupied by the rise of peer competitors to the United States. Hybrid war is already underway and major conventional war is possible. We will contribute to peace support and defence capacity building where we can, and develop certain capabilities for those missions. Yet the changing power dynamics at the global systemic level indicate that the "next war" will be very different from the last. It will likely reflect a return to state based aggression and major conventional war. Over the next five years it is largely to that threat that the army must turn its attention.