

VOLTE-FACE OR FALSE HOPE?

The *volte-face* has become a staple of Canadian defence policy. In the early 1960s, Liberal leader Lester Pearson, theretofore an opponent of accepting American nuclear warheads, “turned on a dime” – as Jack Granatstein so aptly notes – to accept such weapons. On a much grander scale, Pierre Trudeau’s defence policy flipped, in 1975, from a decidedly lukewarm approach to NATO and a trend line which may well have constabularized the Canadian Forces (CF), to a pro-NATO stance and a willingness, albeit a restrained willingness, to restore to the CF a reasonable level of combat capability. The defence policy *volte-face* is not confined to one party. Recall, for example, how quickly the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney jettisoned its June 1987 White Paper – the one now ensconced in the science fiction sections of fine libraries – in the budget of April 1989.

This is not to suggest that a *volte-face* is necessarily bad for the Canadian Forces. The Mulroney flip was quite painful, albeit academic, in that the Cold War ended shortly thereafter, but the Trudeau reversal rescued the CF from the financial wilderness and strategic irrelevance. A defence policy *volte-face* during the Chrétien era (i.e., one that recognized the need to complement the ideals of the human security agenda with a thoroughgoing transformation of the CF) would have been most welcome.

The February 2005 budget did not constitute a *volte-face* by Paul Martin in that it essentially mirrored other Martin-era musings on defence, exemplified by the April 2004 speech at CFB Gagetown, but it most assuredly signalled a shift from the Liberal defence policy of the Chrétien era. Infinitely less clear, particularly given a minority government, is whether the proposed additional funding – and hence the proposed transformation – will fully materialize.

In comparative terms, the budget did a reasonable job of acknowledging the critical ills of the Canadian Forces: a shortage of personnel; a high operational tempo (with deleterious consequences for personnel and their families, training and operational readiness); delayed or foregone repairs, overhauls and upgrades; and a decaying infrastructure. It also enumerated some of the “capital pressures and gaps,” including the lack of “medium capacity helicopters that are capable of moving (personnel and equipment) around in-theatre, whether dealing with international crises or domestic emergencies.”

The budget consequently envisaged \$3 billion over the next five years to support the expansion of the Canadian Forces by 5000 regular force and 3000 reserve

personnel; \$3.2 billion to address sustainability (i.e., improved training and operational readiness, enhanced military medical care, the restocking of critical spares, and the renewal of infrastructure); and \$2.5 billion to acquire “key equipment and capabilities,” including new medium capacity helicopters, logistics trucks, utility aircraft to be employed in the Arctic, and upgraded facilities for Joint Task Force Two (JTF2). It also earmarked \$3.8 billion for post-Defence Policy Review investments.

At least in declaratory terms, the budget would appear to reflect the launch of a more pragmatic defence posture and a belated recognition that the military element of the diplomacy, defence and development *troika* must be backed by appropriate, or tolerably appropriate, personnel and equipment. It no doubt also reflects a recognition in political circles that a failure to take corrective action, or at least the perception of corrective action, would not be politically astute in the eyes of a public which has become at least somewhat more security-sensitive in the post-9/11 world. On another level, the new and emerging defence posture has been drafted into the campaign to mollify the United States in the wake of the decision to eschew formal participation in Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD). This is a fascinating stratagem, but the reaction of some American officials to “trading” trucks and Twin Otter replacements for participation in BMD can well be imagined.

Of the capital investments outlined in the budget, arguably the most intriguing is the requirement for “medium capacity” helicopters. The case for such helicopters is clear and compelling, and provides yet further evidence of the Mulroney government’s short-sightedness in selling off the Chinook fleet and standardizing, in large part for defence industry and political reasons, on the Griffon utility tactical transport helicopter. If the formal specification tilts toward the heavier end of “medium capacity,” then the only real choice would be the newest iteration of the Chinook, the CH-47F. If less capacity suffices, and a high value is placed upon commonality, the result could be an utterly fascinating, and politically awkward, ‘slugfest’ between appropriately configured versions of the EH101 and S-92 – both of which have already been selected for other Canadian applications.

The competition to supply new logistics trucks, unglamorous but indispensable, could also be highly entertaining, and provide a litmus test for a more streamlined procurement process. The Twin Otter has given yeoman service for more than 30 years, but an even more versatile aircraft is long overdue.

Such an acquisition would be consistent with the Martin government's declared interest in enhancing Arctic sovereignty and security. Upgraded facilities for the expanding JTF2 are also essential.

Still awaited are definitive decisions on how best to expeditiously deploy ground forces and their equipment. In some circles, largely but not exclusively political and army, a strategic airlifter, such as the C-17A, is seen as unnecessary and unduly expensive. More crucial, they posit, is the renewal of Canada's tactical/intra-theatre airlift capacity. Others decry our reliance upon allies and private contractors for strategic airlift as unrealistic and sovereignty-eroding (i.e., a splendid example of faith-based strategic airlift). Ironically, if prompt action of some description is not taken, we shall lack both *strategic* airlift and, given the state of the older CC-130s, credible *tactical* airlift. An inability to match the outsize airlift capacity of Belgium and Luxembourg, both of whom have ordered the A400M, would not be reassuring.

There are potentially more choices on the sealift front, but the tradeoffs between the 2004 edition of the Joint Support Ship (JSS), a revised JSS, an enhanced replenishment ship (i.e., an AOR+), a comparatively austere point-to-point sealifter, and a true Landing Platform Dock (LPD) are complex and contentious – and that may not even broach the question of area air defence and command and control.

The bottom line? A reasonably encouraging start, albeit with a host of unanswered questions. Not least are the unresolved financial questions, some of them acknowledged in the budget documents, about how fast new money will flow into the DND budget. For all of the spin, and the media headlines, truly significant financial help will not arrive for some years. That is not reassuring either.

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