Canada’s Strategic Culture: Grand Strategy and the Utility of Force

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The strategic culture of a nation shapes and reflects how that nation views the world, including threats to its security, and then influences the response to that perception. Reduced to its essentials, strategic culture is a reflection of the nation’s understanding of the utility of military force as it interacts with other states. That is, what is the role of military force in achieving political ends as compared to other actions in pursuit of national interests on the global stage (and occasionally domestically) in the face of threats to its sovereignty, physical security, and internal stability?

Strategic Culture

Strategic culture, sometimes described as a nation’s ‘way of war,’ informs a nation’s grand strategy and, consequently, military strategy, so policy-makers and national security practitioners need to appreciate its nature and characteristics. The concept refers to the socially transmitted habits of mind, tradition, and preferred methods of operations that are more-or-less specific to a particular country or security community. It is the product of a particular historical experience that has been shaped by a geographical context. Each strategic culture is inclined to create what purports to be general theories with respect to the basis of national experiences and circumstances. Strategic culture can, therefore, be more precisely defined as:

An integrated system of symbols (argumentation, structure, language analogies, metaphors, etc) that acts to establish pervasive...
and long-term strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in political affairs. The strategic culture thus established reflects national preoccupations and historical experience as much as it does purely objective responses to any given threat environment.2

Strategic culture is a long-term, slow growth phenomenon. Its influence upon how nations view the role and utility of force over time is usefully elucidated in three excellent case studies – Basil Liddell-Hart’s The British Way of War (1957), Russell Weigley’s The American Way of War (1973), and Robert Citino’s The German Way of War (2005).

Four main factors contribute to the evolution of a strategic culture.

- **Geography:** The size and location of a nation are crucial determinants of the way policy-makers and strategists think about security and strategy.
- **History:** Historical experiences influence strategic culture almost as much as geography.
- **Culture, religion, and ideology:** Taken together, these three elements comprise something the Germans have captured in a single expressive word – *weltanschaung* – a worldview or outlook on the world. The influence of this concept upon strategic culture is both elemental and vast.
- **Governance:** The structure of government, military institutions, and the nature of civil-military relations play a crucial role in the development and operation of a strategic culture.

**Grand Strategy and Military Strategy**

As already noted, strategic culture is the pervasive and ubiquitous context within which a nation creates and pursues its grand strategy. Grand strategy has been defined as “…the comprehensive direction of power (any or all assets of a security community) to control situations and areas in order to obtain an objective.”3 This is satisfactory, however, for the purposes of the current discussion that of Colin Gray’s is used in preference as it explicitly includes the political dimension. Thus, grand strategy is “the direction and use made of any or all among the total assets of a security community in support of its policy goals as decided by politics.”4 The theory and practice of grand strategy is the theory and practice of statecraft itself, it is the calculated relationship of means to large ends.4

One leading strategic theorist advises, “…all states have a grand strategy whether they know it or not.”5 It is the intellectual architecture that supports and lends structure to foreign and defence policies, as these policies are articulated within a particular strategic culture. Leaders who are developing grand strategy are not just...
reacting to events or handling them on a case by case basis. Rather, grand strategy is a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so. Grand strategy requires a clear understanding of the nature of the international environment, a country’s highest goals and interests within that environment, the primary threats to those goals and interests, and the ways that finite resources can be used to deal with competing challenges and opportunities. It is, according to Barry Posen the Ford International Professor of Political Science at MIT and the Director of MIT’s Security Studies Program, the theory, or logic that guides leaders, in peace and war, seeking security in a complex and insecure world.

Nested within grand strategy is military strategy, defined here as, “… the direction and use of force, or the threat of such use, for the purposes of policy as decided by politics.” It is, in fact, the direction and exploitation of action at the operational and tactical levels. Operations and tactics are action behaviours, albeit ones requiring ideas, doctrine, organization, and plans. Strategy is the translation function, in theory and practice, of operational and tactical action into strategic consequences, ultimately for political effect.

Canada’s Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy

Viewed through the lens of the four factors described above, it is clear that geography looms exceptionally large as an influence upon Canada’s strategic culture. Canada is a huge country, well endowed with natural resources and adequate agricultural capacity, but also comprising very large expanses of quite inhospitable territory, posing great challenges to nation-building. Beyond that, and, in some respects, more importantly, is the fact that Canada sits atop a country, the United States of America, whose geographical position protected by two vast oceans facilitated its constant inexorable growth, from a union of 13 disparate colonies, to the most powerful nation in the history of mankind, all over the course of the last 239 years.

The two factors of history and culture are inextricably entwined in Canada’s case. First and foremost, the country began with two founding non-indigenous cultures finally merging as a Confederation in 1867. From the British victory in 1759 at Québec, through the Quebec Act (1774), the Constitution Act (1791), the Act of Union (1840), the British North America Act (1867), the Statute of Westminster (1931), and on through the 20th Century; a central political, social, cultural, and economic preoccupation was how to make this union work and prosper.

At the same time, the American Revolutionary War and the establishment of the United States of America (1776-1783) meant that first, the Canadian colony, and then the Canadian nation, was poised between a Mother country from which Canadians would progressively seek autonomy and independence, and a dynamic, expansionist nation, whose power – military, economic, and cultural – would pose an ever present challenge in one form or another to Canadian sovereignty. From 1776 until the dawn of the 20th Century, Canada would look to Great Britain to shield and parry various pressures from the south. After the American Civil War, however, it became very apparent that British power could not counter the American behemoth, even if the British wanted to do so, which they did not particularly relish. Other policies and strategies would be required. By the turn of the 20th Century and then the First World War, the challenge was transformed from a primarily military challenge to more benign, but nonetheless potent, economic and cultural threats.

In terms of governance, Canadian preoccupation was always toward increased autonomy without alienating the Mother Country, managing the bi-cultural, bilingual nature of the nation while expanding West and North, always pursuing growth and prosperity. Firmly anchored in the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, these goals were achieved through statesmanship, compromise, and patience, and almost invariably, through peaceful means.

Canada’s ties to the British posed a particular complication with regard to civil-military relations, with significant ramifications for the evolution of the Canadian strategic culture. From 1867 until 1904 it was a British General Officer Commanding (GOC) at the helm of both British regulars and the Canadian Militia. Relationships with successive Canadian governments were often strained as the Government navigated between the quest for greater independence whilst recognizing the need for British protection on land, and especially at sea, from the uncertain threat from the South. With the abolition of the appointment of Commander-in-Chief in England in...
1904 and the passage of the 1904 Militia Act, the post of a Canadian Chief of the General Staff was created. The 1904 Act also established a Militia Council with wide powers under the Minister.

At the same time, the authorized strength of the Permanent Force was increased to 2000 personnel. According to Jack Granatstein, the Minister, Sir Frederick Borden, tried manfully to support the Regular Force as best he could, even though it, unlike the Militia, had no political constituency. Canada’s strategic culture was significantly shaped by these experiences and would continue to be so for years as policy-makers sought autonomy and freedom from entanglement in British imperial problems, while Canada’s military pursued as close a relationship as possible with British (and later American) forces.

As established above, the concept of a strategic culture is primarily concerned with the utility of military force in the political affairs of a state, both domestically, and, in terms of national security, internationally. In Canada’s case, the preeminent, indeed, primordial political objective was the creation, maintenance, and growth of a transcontinental, bicultural parliamentary confederation. In this regard, the essential thread of Canadian history was the necessity of keeping the double majority of French and English together on certain key issues, and of balancing the British and American influences, while steadily enhancing the strength and independence of Canada.

In fact, there have always been essentially three threats to this objective against which the utility of force had to be measured – disintegration, absorption, and, to a much lesser degree, after 1867 at any rate, an external military threat to the homeland. It was in response to these circumstances that a Canadian grand strategy was conceived and pursued over the decades. Although it may be that many avoid the terminology of grand strategy when talking about Canada, preferring the phrase national security strategy, most still point to the existence of a uniquely-Canadian strategic culture that informs and guides policy makers on crucial matters of national security.10

Disintegration and Absorption

The crux of grand strategy, as explained by the British historian and strategist Paul Michael Kennedy, lies in the capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in peacetime as well as war) best interests. It operates at various levels, political, strategic, operational, and tactical, all interacting with each other to advance the primary aim.11 In Canada’s case, the non-military elements usually ‘trumped’ the utility of force, demonstrating that grand strategy transcends military capability.

Against the first threat, countering disintegration meant, and still does, carefully managing the bicultural nature of the country through such crises as the Manitoba Schools question and the conscription flashpoints in 1917 and 1944. Keeping Nova Scotia in Confederation in the early days, expanding west as rapidly as possible to tie the country together on an East-West axis, and dealing with the less obvious but potential threat of Western alienation, all occupied successive Governments. And lest the reader imagine that the problem of Quebec separatism has receded into history, it is salutary to recall what political scientists Professors Christian Leuprecht and Joel Sokolsky refer to as the “near death” experience of the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty.12 And even more recently, the 2014 provincial election, wherein it appeared that only the utter ineptness of the Parti Quebecois’ campaign assured an overwhelming federalist win. The utility of force in achieving and maintaining national unity was always minimal.

With regard to absorption, or, perhaps more accurately, assimilation, the relationship with the United States since even before Confederation has called for grand strategy of the highest order.

The earliest signs of such a Canadian grand strategy to counter the pressure from the south began to emerge at the time of the Treaty of Washington in 1871, which contributed significantly to the demilitarization of the Canada-US border. Sir John A. Macdonald participated as a member of the British delegation negotiating this treaty. Canada’s first Prime Minister was disappointed in the British failure to strongly promote Canadian interests, but was acutely aware that the best guardian of Canada’s security in the wake of the American Civil War was Anglo-American amity.

A similar scenario was replayed during the Alaska Boundary Dispute at the dawn of the 20th Century. President Theodore Roosevelt was determined to prevail and remarked to his British friends in Washington: “I am going to be ugly,” showing his determination to have his way by dispatching additional troops to Alaska. Six Commissioners were appointed to adjudicate the dispute – three Americans, two Canadians, and one British. On 20 October 1903, the Commissioners came down four-to-two in
favour of the US on all counts; the two Canadians having voted against the decision. The land was handed to the United States. Prime Minister Laurier was furious, and the general sentiment in Canada was that they had been double-crossed. For not the first or last time, Canadian interests were sacrificed for the sake of US-British friendship. However, Canada still inhabited a bi-polar world, and of the two poles, the US continued to raise issues of territory and jurisdiction, restrained largely by the deterrent power of the British, whose will to deter was waning significantly.15

The atmosphere changed rather radically over the next few years. The last British military presence departed Halifax in 1905, and in the same year, Elihu Root became the US Secretary of State. He had been one of the American Commissioners during the Alaska Boundary Dispute, but was now determined to resolve a variety of irritants between his country and Canada. Over the next seven years, Canada and the US systematically confronted and solved most of the outstanding grievances in their relationship. Eight different treaties and agreements were established to cover boundary questions, inland fisheries, North Atlantic fisheries and the fur seal trade on the West coast. The Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 symbolized the spirit of this massive exercise in accommodation. The accord gave birth to the International Joint Commission (IJC), made up of three representatives from each country. This body has been celebrated ever since as an example of the genteel way in which Americans and Canadians do business. In terms of grand strategy, O.D. Skelton, the Deputy Minister at the Department of External Affairs (1925–1941), observed at the time from his perch at Queen’s University that serious friction between the two democracies that halve the continent will from now on be almost as inconceivable as a clash of arms between Alberta and Saskatchewan or New York and New Jersey.16

The Boundary Waters Treaty initiated a process that has essentially been pursued continuously until the present. The two countries have negotiated and implemented the Auto pact, the Columbia River Treaty, the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Free Trade Agreement, and the North American Free Trade Agreement, plus a huge critical mass of other agreements that have deepened economic and commercial interaction.

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Basically, after 1909, relations between the two countries would be managed through diplomacy and mediation. Threats to Canadian sovereignty from the neighbor to the south, however, remained a matter of continuing concern in both the economic and cultural domains. On the other hand, in the security domain, the impending war in Europe in the late-1930s led to an agreement and process that fundamentally altered the relationship with long term consequences. In a speech at Queen’s University in 1937, President Roosevelt declared: “I give you assurance that the people of the US will not stand idly by if domination of Canadian soil is threatened by any other empire.”17 By August 1940, this evolving relationship...
resulted in the Ogdensburg Agreement, and the establishment of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD). Consultations on the Board since its inception have covered a broad range of security and defence issues and would lead, during the Cold War, to the formation of NORAD.

What then can be said about the utility of force with respect to the threat of assimilation? Clearly, after the American Civil War, the question of generating enough military force to successfully oppose a plausible American invasion was a virtual ‘non-starter.’ With the withdrawal of British forces from North America, this conclusion was simply reinforced. In terms of Canadian grand strategy, the utility of armed force revolved around two considerations unconnected to a direct military threat from the south. First, as Canada pursued greater independence and autonomy from Great Britain, a military establishment of some kind was required as a symbol of emerging sovereignty. The size of such a force to satisfy this criteria, in the absence of any other realistic threat, was almost completely discretionary.

Second, a major consideration with regard to the American relationship was not, as already discussed, to resist an irresistible assault, but increasingly, as a means for ‘defence against help’ to mitigate a possibility of unilateral US actions to safeguard their security, which could, in turn, endanger Canada’s sovereignty and economic prosperity. This was less discretionary and it would become a very salient consideration during and after the Second World War.

**The Direct Threat**

A direct threat to the territorial integrity of Canada, other than from the US, is the third major threat that Canadian policymakers and strategists have had to consider over the years. Such a threat for many countries has represented the main factor shaping their assessment of the utility of force, and hence, their grand strategy. Indeed, such a threat, from time to time, was existential, for example, Prussia in 1806, and Poland in 1939. Until the Second World War, this manner of threat was virtually non-existent in the Canadian case, and it was not until the Cold War and the dawn of the nuclear era that a direct threat from outside the North American continent became a matter of considerable concern.

On the other hand, British imperial policy continued to pressure Canada after 1867, along with other members of the Empire, to be prepared to contribute military forces to imperial conflicts and wars around the globe. Theoretically, this could have led to a grand strategy that accepted this demand and prepared for it by maintaining large forces to respond when requested. This did not happen. Thus, at the outbreak of the Boer War in South Africa in 1899 pressure mounted on the Laurier Government from both Westminster in London, as well as from the Canadian branch of the British Empire League to provide assistance. This pressure was skillfully met and ‘finessed’ by the Government agreeing to transport voluntary contingents of mainly British patriots to that theatre of war.
The situation was quite different in 1914. Although there was certainly no direct threat to Canadian territory, it was a virtual certainty that if Great Britain was involved in a major war in Europe, Canada would participate. In fact, Canadians readily accepted that when Britain declared war on 4 August 1914, Canada was automatically involved. There was no separate Canadian declaration of war. As was the case in all European countries, war euphoria swept through at least English speaking Canada and most expectations were for a short, decisive conflict reminiscent of the wars since the Crimean War in 1854.

By 1918, most were fully aware of the horrors of the previous four years and particularly the 60,000 dead Canadians. The country had, nonetheless, come of age politically and on the international stage, and it was accorded its own seat at the peace conference in Versailles. The bloody experience did not, however, significantly alter the Canadian view of the utility of force for the long term, and as the well-known Canadian historian Desmond Morton has noted: “…safe behind the Atlantic, protected as much now by the new US navy as by the British fleet, Canadians would go crusading no more.”

This attitude led to a strongly held position with regard to the key Article X of the Charter of the League of Nations, of which Canada was a founding member. Article X pledged that signatories undertook to protect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all state members of the League. The Canadian representatives involved in drafting the Charter at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 made clear their opposition to the Article, which, in their view, virtually dictated that Europe’s future wars were going to be Canada’s wars. The Canadian goal throughout the 1920s was to subvert the Article. The rationale for this was made clear by Senator Raoul Dandurand in 1924, when he stated unequivocally: “We live in a fireproof house, far from inflammable materials.”

To be sure, there was no element of pacifism in this policy, or grand strategy, nor did it reflect an inclination for neutrality or non-alignment. In fact, pursuing this latter policy would have forced a significant change in Canada’s strategic culture and grand strategy with regard to the utility of force. The examples of Sweden and Switzerland among others indicate that a credible declaration of neutrality usually requires a significant military force to back it up. The policy was, nonetheless, distinctly isolationist and would remain so, alongside the US, until the Second World War, notwithstanding Canada’s membership in the League. In fact, Mackenzie King, Prime Minister for most of the period between 1920 and 1939, never entertained the slightest hope that the League would prevent war after the US declined to join it. He bluntly stated in May 1936, that: “…collective bluffing cannot bring collective security.”

This policy of non-entanglement was, however, somewhat contested by the Canadian military which remained in close contact with their military colleagues in the UK. O.D. Skelton was particularly upset when he discovered in the 1930s that the Canadian General Staff was drafting mobilization plans for an expeditionary force to support Great Britain in any future European war. It was pure folly, Skelton declared, for the Canadian Army to use the pretext of a major war as the ordinary and permanent design and strength of its peacetime organization. Major wars, he argued, were rare events to be dealt with if and when they occurred. “If the General Staff continued to wander in the realm of the extraordinary and unpredictable there was good reason to question whether a Canadian soldier need bother thinking at all.”

“It is interesting, and very relevant to the theme of this article, to note the apparent disconnect between policymakers and Army planners in the late-1980s, a recent dynamic, but reminiscent of civil-military relations in the 1930s, and suggestive of the continuity that inheres in strategic culture. Rejecting the Government’s policy of a modest, even token force in Europe, the Army continued to fight against policy and planning guidance, and pressed for a mass mobilization plan, while also advocating its ‘big army’ Corps 86 and Corps 96 force structure. The attempt to design an army so far removed from political and financial support can only be described, according to Professor Peter Kasurak of Canada’s Royal Military College, as a bizarre episode of magical thinking. The Government simply ignored the Corps exercises or was not even aware of them.”

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With the inexorable approach of the Second World War in 1938–1939, there was again little doubt that Canada would support Great Britain. When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Prime Minister King summoned Parliament to decide Canada’s response to the European crisis, with no suspense about the outcome, but emphasising that Canada would decide for itself whether it was at peace or war. As King’s Quebec lieutenant, Ernest Lapointe stated: “By doing nothing, by being neutral, we would actually be taking the side of Adolf Hitler.” Canada declared war on Germany separately from Great Britain on 10 September 1939, with only a few Quebec MPs and J. S. Woodsworth voting against participation. Over the next six years, Canada fielded a force of over one million personnel from a nation of only 11 million. The army, navy, and air force fought valiantly in Sicily, Italy, and continental Europe and in the Far East. By war’s end, Canada had fully emerged from the Great Depression, and, in fact, its economic prospects looked bright indeed. In addition, Canada’s navy was the fourth-largest in the world, with a large combat ready field army and a seasoned air force. Canadians justifiably viewed the war effort as righteous, but were in no way inclined to maintain such a force in peacetime. In fact, Mackenzie King quickly reduced the 478,000 army to 19,000 personnel by 1947.

Canada’s grand strategy for the post-war environment was based instead in large part upon the ‘functional principle,’ or at least, the Canadian version of David Mitrany’s functionalism first articulated in 1943 in a widely read paper entitled “A Working Peace System” (later expanded to a book). It became a fundamental principle of Canada’s policy towards post-war international organizations and inter-state relations to ensure that in whatever institutions and regimes might be created to keep the peace, member states other than great powers should not be indiscriminately lumped together without due regard for the important differences by which they could or ought to be distinguished. In other words, there should be a differentiation between secondary powers and lesser powers. The distinction that concerned Canadians was not between the US and Canada, but between Canada, and, say, El Salvador. This was the genesis of the concept of ‘a middle power.’

Implicit in this version of functionalism was the need for a rules-based regime internationally to provide space for middle powers to operate. This regime must be accorded legitimacy by the community of states. It was hoped this might constrain unilateral actions by the major powers, and the UN was viewed as a model of such a legitimizing regime.

As a founding member of both the United Nations and NATO, and as a middle power, Canada sought a status commensurate with the contribution this country could make to world peace, diplomatically and economically. Until the Korean War, however, policymakers and strategists did not foresee great utility in Canadian military force to prosecute Canadian grand strategy. However, the conflict on the Korean peninsula, and the crisis created by the Berlin Blockade and the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia led, not only to a Special Force to fight in Korea, but to the commitment of ground troops to Europe – initially on the understanding that the Canadian Brigade would be a token force and a temporary expedient until the Western European economies revived sufficiently to ensure their own security. In fact, once the Soviet Union achieved a significant nuclear capability, politicians and civilian officials lost whatever belief they had had in the utility of land forces in Europe to provide anything more than ‘trip wire’ defences. With this in mind, Defence Minister George Pearkes turned down the Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant-General S.F. Clark’s proposed army of three mechanized brigades because he did not see how Europe could be reinforced once a war had gone nuclear.

By 1952, the international landscape had changed radically. The ‘Iron Curtain’ was firmly in place, and the bi-polar confrontation between the two ideologies of liberal capitalism and Leninist communism had taken shape. There was no doubt which side Canada was on and the question now was – what was the utility of force, and how much of it in this new context. With the massive deployment of American troops to a now militarized NATO, Canada was locked in to a permanent forward presence, although the size of such a force was cut in half by the early-1970s, leaving a small brigade and three fighter squadrons in theatre. It was at this time, in 1971, that the Government declared that there was no obvious level of defence spending in Canada’s situation. The sense of wide discretion concerning this question was and remains characteristic of Canada’s strategic culture. By the early 1950s as well, the ‘over the pole’ bomber and then missile threat to the North American continent created the requirement to actively participate in a large scale air defence enterprise (NORAD), in part to counter the Soviet threat, but also to forestall a significant, if benign, threat to Canadian sovereignty from the US. For the first time in Canadian history, a significant professional standing force was created and maintained.
Canada’s participation in the United Nations also called forth the requirement for a relatively large military force in Canadian terms in order to make a meaningful contribution to peacekeeping. This role served Canadian grand strategy in several ways. First, it made a very ‘functional’ contribution to international security and stability in a niche that the US, Russia, China, and, to a large extent, past colonial powers could not fill. Second, in most cases, peacekeeping helped diffuse crises that otherwise may have led to direct confrontation between the US and Soviet Union, with perhaps disastrous consequences. Third, Canadian efforts often directly assisted allies, individually and/or collectively. Canada’s leading role in UNEF 1 in 1956 is a prime example that helped extricate the US, British, and French forces from a very awkward situation during the Suez crisis. The 30-year mission in Cyprus was primarily designed to reduce the chances of a collapse of NATO’s southern flank should a war between Greece and Turkey ensue over the ownership of that island. Finally, the peacekeeping role resonated strongly with Canadians domestically, which rounded out the success of this element of grand strategy nicely.

Throughout the Cold War, Canada’s military posture remained fairly stable although gradually shrinking in terms of numbers and as a percentage of GDP, despite persistent demands for a greater effort from NATO, as well as a vocal pro-defence lobby domestically. Neither influence, however, had an appreciable impact upon the strategic culture shaping foreign and defence policy and consequent grand strategy. By the mid-1960s, one prominent Canadian scholar would conclude: “…the main and overriding motive for the maintenance of the Canadian military establishment since the Second World War has had little to do with our security as such. It has had everything to do with underpinning our diplomatic and negotiating positions vis-à-vis various international organizations and other countries.”

Certainly, when it came to the Atlantic Alliance, Ottawa’s goals were to keep Canada in allied councils, keep defence spending down, and keep criticism from the right and the left out of the public discourse on defence policy. More recently, Joel Sokolsky and Christian Leuprecht, completing the analysis to the present, and referring to what they term traditional Canadian grand strategy, concluded:

“Canada’s participation in the United Nations also called forth the requirement for a relatively large military force in Canadian terms in order to make a meaningful contribution to peacekeeping.”

Ironically, Canada’s approach to grand strategy has left little room for the military strategic component of this construct. Throughout Canadian history, Canada’s military contribution to operations has always been at the tactical level. Even the Canadian
Corps in the First World War, and the First Canadian Army in the Second World War must be viewed as operating at the tactical level in the context of the armies and army groups prosecuting allied strategy. To be sure, the performance of these troops was always as proud professionals and fierce warriors, but the military strategy directing their use was made in London, Washington, Brussels, and even in New York. The then-young Canadian scholar Colin Gray coined the phrase “strategic theoretical parasitism” to describe Canada’s penchant for relying on the strategic thinking of its erstwhile great power partners. In 2000, another scholar in the field of national security studies observed that Canada has shown a strong inclination to forgo the strategic planning function altogether, preferring instead to place emphasis upon Canadian values rather than to admit that this country could have something as unseemly as self-interested aims in foreign policy.

One important and pernicious result of this situation is that military strategy per se has been and remains little studied outside the frameworks established by the US and the UK during the professional development of the Canadian officer corps. This must be assessed as professionally and intellectually debilitating, since military strategy is, arguably, the most difficult of all the levels of war and conflict – political, strategic, operational, and tactical. Furthermore, as Colin Gray advises: “…because strategy is uniquely difficult among the levels of war few are the people able to shine in the role. Their number can be increased by education, though not by training and not at all reliably by the experience of command and planning at warfare’s operational and tactical levels.” Going forward, national security professionals will need to ‘Canadianize’ the study of strategy, and eliminate Gray’s ‘parasitism.’

To be sure, Canadian strategic culture has also caused senior civilian security officials to neglect the serious study of grand strategy, Canadian or otherwise. The military officer thus tends to bring tactical and operational perspectives to the table, while the civilian national security professional tends to undervalue the utility of force in their conception of strategy, focussing instead upon diplomacy and other non-military elements of national power.

To fully appreciate the nature of Canadian grand strategy during the period discussed by Gray and Professor David Haglund of Queen’s University, it is instructive to consider carefully the metaphors embedded in Canadian strategic culture used to describe Canada. Canada routinely referred to itself, or was characterised by others as a “fireproof house” and later as a “helpful fixer,” a “linchpin” or an “honest broker;” all roles that tended to de-emphasise the utility of force in its foreign and defence policies. This becomes starkly clearer when compared to metaphors such as “the arsenal of democracy,” or the “global cop,” as they have been applied to our closest ally.

The end of the Cold War ushered in, not a new world order, but rather, 25 quite tumultuous years where the comforting metaphors of the past no longer seemed particularly relevant. For a very brief period, however, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the utility of force seemed even less than at any time in Canada’s history. An unduly hasty withdrawal of stationed forces in Europe was implemented, and a distinct turn to UN peacekeeping was executed. The first Gulf War was unexpected and Canada’s contribution was minimal, despite the fact that it was conducted under a UN Mandate. In this case, the US was most interested in maximum diplomatic support,
as they were fully prepared to do the heavy lifting militarily themselves. There was now an explicit expectation by both Mulroney’s Conservative Government and Chretien’s Liberal Government that a “peace dividend” was due. A more diffuse but palpable sense that this was the case was reflected in Canadian public attitudes as well.

This grace period was very short, as classic peacekeeping missions in Mozambique, Angola, and Haiti evolved into much more difficult and dangerous missions in the Balkans, Somalia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. At the same time, successive Governments were determined to balance the federal budget and the Department of Defence and the Canadian Forces were subject to a series of drastic budget cuts. There was, nonetheless, no indication that Canada would revert to isolationism. Since 1945, Canada had become a member of the G7/8, had repatriated the Constitution (1982), and was thoroughly integrated into the international system through its membership and involvement in myriad multi-national organizations and agreements. Canada’s strategic culture, however, had not evolved appreciably, and the main preoccupation of successive governments remained national unity, national prosperity, and a guarded, though close and friendly attitude towards the world’s sole remaining superpower to the south.

9/11 and its aftermath would seriously test the nature of the country’s long-term strategic culture, and it pointed to the possible need to reassess its grand strategy and view of the utility of force. The attack produced a very real and visceral feeling that we, along with our American cousins were vulnerable as never before to a direct threat at home. There was consequently very little doubt that Canada would participate in the campaign in Afghanistan, especially given its legitimacy by virtue of UN authorization. Our involvement was probably as non-discretionary as one could conceive. It also reflected a sense that the threat had to be met and contained at arm’s length, namely, overseas. Notably, and with important ramifications for grand strategy going forward, the Afghan campaign involved a serious effort to build and sustain a Whole of Government approach to operations both in Ottawa and in theater to effect nation-building in that country. Canada sensibly declined to participate in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, unconvinced that invasion offered a better solution than continuing containment. In addition, the campaign lacked legitimacy in the view of the Government and most Canadians without a clear UN mandate. Limited participation in the air campaign against Libya, on the other hand, enjoyed widespread support because it was viewed as an expression of a commitment to the UN’s Responsibility to Protect doctrine, to which Canada had contributed a great amount of effort to craft and to promulgate. Libya’s subsequent instability after the air campaign has served to remind strategists that complex geo-political security problems may require persistent long-term solutions.

The Future

Looking back over the course of Canadian history one would have to believe that Canada’s grand strategy has been a resounding success resulting in a secure, prosperous and vital liberal democracy envied to varying degrees the world over. From the standpoint of early-2015, of the three threats to Canada that have shaped strategic culture and grand strategy, two clearly appear to have receded in importance. Disintegration, in particular Quebec separation, seems more unlikely than ever but it would be imprudent to conclude that the movement is dead. In terms of assimilation, a mature, confident Canada remains in an amicable relationship with the US, although a recent survey indicates that a majority of Canadians (76 percent) say that the country needs government policies to protect Canadian culture from being subsumed by the US.34

In terms of a direct physical threat, the past is not prologue, and the future poses new threats and challenges. Demographically and socially, Canada is now a multi-cultural nation interacting with the world in the context of ever-increasing globalization. This has important implications for how Canadians view this world. Which threats resonate, and to what degree, may well be changing.

The threat from ISIS, and the broader threat from a variety of non-state actors using terrorism as their main coercive means have Canadians upset to be sure, and also supportive of military efforts to disrupt and contain these forces. The degree to which this translates into a major alteration in the perception of the utility of force, and how much force, to be reflected in Canada’s grand strategy remains to be seen. At this stage, according to one assessment, although nearly 50 percent of Canadians feel less secure than two years ago, only 9 percent think that terrorism and national security should be the top priority for the Government. The usual suspects of the economy (89 percent), health care (87 percent), jobs (81 percent), and the environment (75 percent) all rank much higher.35
With all this in mind, and reviewing the period since 1989, it seems as though successive Governments, up to the present, have still been pursuing the ‘peace dividend’ apparently on offer at that time, through some difficult periods. Spending on defence as a percentage of GDP fell from 1.9 percent to 1.1 percent in 2000, despite the number and intensity of military operations. After 9/11, according to the Stockholm Institute for Peace Research, the percentage has continued to decline from 1.2 percent in 2001 to 1 percent in 2014. This is the percentage spent on defence by New Zealand, Belgium, Latvia, and the Slovak Republic.  

Is Canada, therefore, still an “easy-rider,” and, if so, this metaphor should prompt a reassessment of grand strategy going forward. Defence White Papers since 1964, at least, have always postulated three main and largely discrete missions – defence of Canada, continental defence, and international stability. Given the potential strategic reach of current adversaries, these three missions perhaps should be conflated and viewed more holistically.

Over the longer term, but starting now, Canada’s grand strategy must also fully address the development and security of the Canadian Arctic. With the opening, year round, of all three northern passages (the North West Passage, the Northern Sea Route, and the Transpolar Route) the circumpolar region over the next 20–30 years will equal or even exceed the importance of the world’s traditional maritime passages/straits/chokepoints. The competition for resources, tourism, criminality of all types, social stability, and potentially direct military challenges will require a much larger military capability, both stationed, and in reserve in the south. These forces, while combat ready, will not be intended for aggressive purposes, but rather, to enhance security, to assist with robust policing, and to ensure unequivocal sovereignty.

To properly and effectively prosecute these strategic missions, it is imperative that the strategy be firmly based on a Whole of Government approach that integrates all elements of national power. A few years ago, then-Senator Hugh Segal advocated an approach based upon the ‘3Ds’ of defence, diplomacy, and development. “We need to develop a grand strategy for a small country that integrates military, diplomatic and foreign aid instruments that preserves security and opportunity at home, advances leverage with our allies and responds in an integrated way to the threats that are real from abroad. These need to be built into real plans and models that maximize the ability of each to engage constructively.”

Since then, the theory and practice of Whole of Government, or as they are called internationally, Comprehensive Operations, have advanced significantly. In the future such operations will call for the integration of numerous departments and agencies planning and operating with a high degree of unity of effort. In fact, what is required is the development of a robust ‘community of practice’ of national security professionals. This cadre, operating at both the level of practitioner and policy analysts, must, as recently advocated in a RAND study on the topic, “integrate and educate.”

Military doctrine on strategy and planning should be revised to reflect actual practices, and, in particular, the dynamic and iterative nature of the process and formulating of policy and grand strategy. Civilians, as part of this community of practice, should receive a solid education in the fundamentals of national security strategy (i.e. grand strategy).

What is required now is that national security policy makers, civilian officials and military professionals alike understand the nested nature and coherence of strategic culture, grand strategy and military strategy. Only then will there be a reasonable consensus with respect to the true utility of force.
The aurora borealis shines above a Vuntut Gwitchin smokehouse.

NOTES

1. Key national security practitioners include the DND/CAF, Public Safety, CSIS, DFAITD, CBSA, CCG, the RCMP, and the NSA.
14. Walter Falbe, *The American Age: US Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), p. 241. The nub of the Alaska issue was access through its long, narrow southern panhandle to Canada’s Yukon gold fields. If the American claim was upheld, Canada would own none of the water routes inland.
33. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge…*, p. 138. The work of Carl von Clausewitz is almost completely absent from Canadian military schools despite the fact that both Gray and Bernard Brodie have argued that Clausewitz is the closest that strategy’s theorists have come to the status of Newton and Einstein. *On War* offers dicta that approximate the theories of gravity and relativity.
34. Ishmael Daro in the *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 March 2015.