



DND photo TN09-2015-0282-014 by Corporal Dan Strohan

Elements of the Canadian Armed Forces Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) depart from CFB Trenton, 26 April 2015, to help the earthquake victims in Nepal.

## Public Opinion and Defence

by Martin Shadwick

**A**s tough economic times, faltering defence spending, and mounting questions over the fiscal sustainability of Canada's existing national defence program prompt a renewed debate over the merits (or otherwise) of a multi-purpose, combat-capable defence establishment, a combat-capable—but niche—defence establishment, a constabulary defence establishment, or some form of quintessentially Canadian hybrid defence establishment, it is an opportune moment to reflect upon recent trends in Canadian public opinion and defence. It is no less true for being obvious that the standard approach to this subject commences with the time-honoured observation that Canadians, for the most part, rather like their armed forces, but are inclined, for a variety of reasons (many of them equally time-honoured), to take a decidedly parsimonious approach to defence spending. Simply put, what do Canadians think of their armed forces today? What priorities, both domestic and international, would they assign to the Canadian Armed Forces? Can generalized support for the armed forces be translated into public support for specific roles, missions, and capabilities, even those carrying hefty price tags, or must there always be a discontinuity in the relationship?

One particularly useful tool is DND's annual tracking study, conducted for DND in recent years by Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc., to "explore Canadians' perceptions of the Canadian Armed Forces and related issues." The May 2014 tracking study generated some fascinating data, some of it confirming long-established trends, some of it providing very uplifting reading for the defence hierarchy in Canada, and some of it posing potential challenges for defence planning and prioritizing in Canada. Not at all surprising, for example, were its findings that Canadians have a "limited" overall familiarity with the Canadian Armed Forces and that "problems for veterans" and "soldiers returning home" were "top of mind for many Canadians when asked what they recalled about the [Canadian Armed Forces]." Approximately half, 51 percent, of those polled thought that the armed forces did "at least a moderately good job" of taking care of returning soldiers, but fully 38 percent thought that the armed forces did "a poor job" in this area. The tracking study found that traditional media, notably television news, was cited most frequently as a source of information about the armed forces, but noted, as one would expect, that the Internet was moving up quickly as a source of information. In 2012, the Internet ranked fourth behind television news, daily newspapers, and television in general. By 2014, the Internet was second only to television news.

“Canadians,” found the 2014 tracking study, “continue to hold positive views of the CAF. The vast majority (89 percent) have a positive impression of CAF personnel, with exactly three-in-five describing their impression as *strongly* positive. Strongly positive impressions have been steadily increasing over time. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there was a 12 percentage point increase (from 34 percent to 46 percent in 2001) and an additional nine percentage point increase after the CAF was deployed to Kandahar (from 49 percent to 58 percent in 2006). Now, at the end of the Afghanistan mission, *strongly* positive impressions are the highest on record.” Moreover, “large majorities said they view the military as a source of pride (83 percent) and believe it is essential (80 percent).” These are strikingly impressive numbers, but two caveats must be noted. First, high regard for the armed forces does not necessarily translate into financial largesse from Canadians, and second, unforeseen events can quickly erode even the most stellar polling numbers. Canada’s armed forces enjoyed exceptional visibility and public acclaim in the immediate post-Cold War period due to the Gulf War, aid of the civil power requirements (i.e., the Oka crisis), UN operations in the former Yugoslavia, and other activities, only to experience deep and profound erosion of public esteem in the wake of the Somalia affair.

Particularly intriguing—and in some respects, potentially worrisome, given the fiscal and political environment for defence in Canada—was the finding that “Canadians are split on whether the priority of the Canadian Armed Forces should be domestic or international affairs. Just over two-out-of-five (43 percent) Canadians said the CAF should prioritize domestic issues, whereas exactly two-out-of-five (40 percent) think international issues should be top priority.” Compared to 2012, “Canadians continue to feel the priority of the CAF should be domestic rather than international, and this



Her Majesty's Canadian Ship *Fredericton* patrols the Mediterranean Sea as part of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 during Operation *Reassurance*, 20 February 2015.

proportion has increased steadily since 2010, from 33 percent to 43 percent in 2014. Moreover, at 43 percent, it is the highest it has been since tracking began in 2005, when 36 percent of Canadians preferred that the CAF focus upon domestic affairs.”

DND photo HS41-2015-0038-004



DND Photo WT2015-0052-20 by Corporal True-dee McCarthy

A Canadian soldier speaks to Enriquillo village police officers (exercise actors) to ensure good relations while providing security for the local inhabitants during Exercise *Maple Resolve*, Wainwright, Alberta, 3 May 2015.

The study also found that “Quebec residents were more likely than others to prefer a domestic focus.” The 2014 tracking study did not define or cite examples of “domestic” roles, but the much more voluminous 2012 tracking study, undertaken by the same firm, found particularly strong public support for military responses to domestic natural disasters, and, to a lesser degree, for the protection of Canadian sovereignty through border surveillance. Also appearing on the 2012 list were search and rescue (which 71 percent of respondents deemed *very* important), protection against terrorist threats, military assistance to law enforcement and other government departments, helping to prevent illegal immigration and human smuggling, helping to prevent illegal drug smuggling, and Arctic surveillance. Terrorism-related aspects aside, this list is highly reminiscent of the domestic preferences that surfaced in DND-commissioned public opinion polling during the early post-Cold War period. The significance of the domestic/international split identified in the tracking study is not so much the strength of the domestic faction, but the strong tendency to cast “domestic” in essentially quasi-military, non-military, and constabulary terms, rather than in military-centric “defence of Canada” terms.

The 2014 tracking study also reported that “Canadians are divided over whether a peacekeeping or peacemaking role is more appropriate for the CAF. Approximately half (52 percent) said they support an international role that includes combat, whereas 44 percent prefer a role that focuses more upon traditional peacekeeping duties.” The latter were defined as “operations around the world that involve observation duties or monitoring a ceasefire or truce between two conflicting parties.” *Peacemaking*, in contrast, was

defined as “operations around the world that could include security patrols, development assistance, and fighting alongside allied troops to implement peace in an unstable area.” Public opinion “...on this issue has been divided since 2008 when tracking began, with the balance sliding back and forth marginally over the years. What is notable, however, is that, since 2011, a slightly greater proportion” of Canadians have favoured peacemaking over peacekeeping. It is conceivable, at least to some degree, that such numbers reflect a belated recognition that “traditional peacekeeping” operations are not a growth area, and that future Canadian participation in United Nations or similar operations will effectively amount to robust peacekeeping (i.e., something closer to peacemaking).

The tracking study additionally reported strong support for international cooperation. Eighty-nine percent of respondents “... agreed that it’s critical that Canada and the United States cooperate for the defence of North America, with more than two-thirds saying they *strongly* agree. A similar proportion (91 percent) agreed that Canada’s membership in NATO is important for Canadian security, with more than half (59 percent) *strongly* agreeing with this statement.” Subsequent events in Ukraine and Crimea would presumably have reinforced such views.

On the fiscal side, the tracking study reported that “Canadians are most likely to think that Canada’s military is under-funded, not over-funded. Forty-three percent hold this view, with 18 percent saying the CAF is *significantly* underfunded (up from 14 percent in 2012). Approximately one-third...of Canadians believe the CAF receives the right amount of funding. At the other end of

the spectrum, 11 percent said the CAF receives too much funding. This year marks the end of the steady decline in the proportion of Canadians who believe the military is under-funded. From a high of 82 percent in 2004, the view that the CAF is under-funded dropped to a low of 36 percent in 2012. In 2014, this has increased by seven percentage points to 43 percent.” This data prompts two observations. First, the decline in the percentage of Canadians who perceived an under-funding of defence may have reflected a public assumption that Ottawa was busily, and expensively, recapitalizing the armed forces. Second, “thinking” that the armed forces are under-funded does not necessarily translate into measurable public support for additional defence expenditures.

In sum, the 2014 tracking study revealed that Canada’s armed forces enjoy an impressive reservoir of public goodwill, that Canadians are split over domestic and international defence priorities, over peacekeeping and peacemaking commitments, and over the appropriate level of defence spending, that those who favour a domestic focus for their armed forces are thinking in essentially constabulary terms, and that most Canadians value our NATO and continental security relationships. Some of these trends and indicators have no doubt been reinforced by subsequent events at home (i.e., the tragedies in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and at the National War Memorial) and abroad (i.e., Europe, Iraq, Syria). How might these findings influence Canada’s future defence priorities and force structure?

The general assumption in many quarters today is that the type of “multi-purpose, combat-capable” defence establishment explicitly endorsed by the Chretien government’s white paper of 1994 (but not delivered) and implicitly endorsed by the Harper

government’s Canada First Defence Strategy of 2008 (partially delivered, with question marks over projected acquisitions) are simply not tenable, for both political and financial reasons, in the foreseeable future. As Jeffrey Simpson of the *Globe and Mail* has observed, “the core of the problem is that the Canadian military wants—and the government wants—to be all things for all situations (minus nuclear weapons, of course) on a budget that does not allow for those ambitions.”

The net result has been a renewed wave of interest in reshaping Canada’s defence commitments, and force structure, to best fit today’s political, fiscal, and international environments. As Bernd Horn noted in a thoughtful analysis for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in March 2015, the “bottom line is that the CAF must maintain a number of generic combat capabilities in order to ensure it can meet the required remits. Yet to maintain a sharp operational edge the CAF may need to shed some of its legacy “baggage” that represents sunk costs that have little strategic return. For instance, the existence of large fleets of ships—the RCN’s definition of “large fleets” would no doubt differ—“armoured vehicles, huge garrison footprints, etc., all mortgage readiness and deployability for quantity and generic capability.” Horn offers some intriguing thoughts on usefulness, and less than useful, Canadian military capabilities, but acknowledges the “risk of getting it wrong” and takes note of Sir Michael Howard’s cautionary observation in 2010 that: “No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to not be so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed.” Quite right, but easier said than done.

DND photo PA2015-0050-10 by Sergeant Jean-François Lauzé



A CH-146 *Griffon* helicopter from 438 Tactical Helicopter Squadron fires flares during the Basic Tactical Aviation Course conducted with CH-147F *Chinook* helicopters from 450 Tactical Helicopter Squadron, 31 March 2015, at Garrison Petawawa, Ontario.



DND photo GD2015-0085-15

An Aviation Systems technician prepares to remove a propeller from a CP-140 *Aurora* for maintenance during Operation *Impact*, 21 February 2015.



DND photo HS41-2015-0068-092

A crewmember from HMCS *Fredericton* engages a C9 machine gun while a .50 calibre machine gun team reloads in a simulated small boat attack during Exercise *Joint Warrior*, as part of their deployment on Operation *Reassurance*, 19 April 2015.

Can the impressive levels of generalized support for the armed forces evident in the tracking study be translated into meaningful public support for specific roles, missions, and capabilities, including those requiring substantial capital and sustainment expenditures? In and of themselves, no. Strong, broad-based public support remains an invaluable, indeed pivotal, prerequisite for a credible Canadian defence policy, force structure and defence budget, but transforming that general reservoir of goodwill toward the armed forces into more specialized and sustained support for specific defence policy choices and priorities will require much more—including clear, cogent, and compelling rationales for a realistic defence policy and defence establishment from the government, the military, and other relevant stakeholders. General-purpose ‘insurance,’ or ‘just-in-case’ arguments for the retention of a credible defence establishment will not, on their own, suffice. Pragmatic Canadians will also be looking for assurances that the defence policy of the future and its associated force structure—be it “multi-purpose, combat capable,” “multi-purpose, combat-capable lite,” “niche” or “niche-plus” combat-capable, or “constabulary with an attitude”—will represent good value for money, deliver sound management, and be devoid of gold plating. It should also be noted that the impressive level of public goodwill identified in the tracking study would dissipate in record time if the shedding of legacy “baggage” degenerates into bitter, internecine warfare between the services (and the SOF community).

It is evident, too, that the shedding or reducing of DND’s already much-diminished stock of quasi-military, non-military and constabulary roles would, from a public opinion perspective—and, indeed, from operational and other perspectives that have nothing to do with public opinion—be shortsighted and counterproductive. Strong public support in that area also suggests that it would be prudent to undertake a thoroughgoing and holistic examination of the synergies, or potential synergies, between the military, quasi-military, and non-military roles of Canada’s armed forces. Similarly, when viewed from the vantage point of public support for defence, it would be prudent to engage in both peacekeeping and peacemaking operations. The recent increase in the Canadian contribution to the MFO could prove a useful harbinger in that regard, but it is unfortunate that security considerations rendered the augmentation a move of which very few Canadian civilians are aware.

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DND photo IS09-2015-0030-022 by Corporal Kevin McMillan

A Canadian Armed Forces Light Urban Search and Rescue (LUSAR) team works alongside members of the Burnaby Fire Department and locals from the village of Lamosengu, 70 kilometres northeast of Kathmandu, Nepal, 1 May 2015.