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Peter Jones \(^{a}\) & Philippe Lagassé \(^{a}\)
\(^{a}\) Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Ave. East, Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1N 6N5

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Rhetoric versus reality: Canadian defence planning in a time of austerity

Peter Jones* and Philippe Lagassé

Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Ave. East, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1N 6N5

As Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan winds down and the country faces several years of fiscal austerity, all of Canada’s major political parties are agreed that Canadian defence budgets must stay level or be cut. This comes at a time when the defence department is slated to replace the Canadian Forces’ (CF) major equipment fleets. Canada’s defence establishment thus faces some critical decisions. One option is to try to maintain its expeditionary capabilities across all three services: army, navy and air force. Absent substantial new infusions of funds, however, this approach is likely to lead to an overall and largely chaotic reduction of capabilities. Another option is to make some difficult choices as to which expeditionary capabilities to maintain as part of a strategic review of Canada’s future military needs. Such an option would ensure that Canada has at least some military capacities which can reliably be devoted to the most demanding international operations, while maintaining those capabilities required for domestic duties and North American defence. Pursuing this option would accord with the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization Strategic Concept and the call for “Smart Defense” within the Alliance. This article assesses the arguments for and against the option of specialising Canada’s future defence capabilities and explores scenarios as to what a future CF may look like.

Keywords: Canada; Canadian forces; specialisation; NATO; Smart Defense

Introduction

The 2010 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Strategic Concept suggests that members move to eliminate redundant capabilities and achieve a more efficient and effective collective defence. With several allies cutting their defence budgets, Alliance members have concluded that resources must be better managed to maintain NATO’s overall ability to undertake and sustain operations. Although it was not stated explicitly, one of the Strategic Concept’s underlying messages is that Alliance members could tailor their forces to fill particular niches. As noted in the document, the Alliance must use its resources in the “most efficient and effective way possible” by reducing “unnecessary duplication” and developing and operating “capabilities jointly, for reasons of cost-effectiveness.”[1] This “niche” approach to defence planning would allow countries to focus their limited defence budgets on specific sets of complementary capabilities, thereby eliminating the need for each member to field multi-purpose forces and preserving the Alliance’s overall capacity to act. The idea was reiterated by NATO’s Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, at the 2011 Munich Security Conference. Calling on allies to embrace what he called “Smart Defense,” he argued that NATO members must “pool and share capabilities.”

*Corresponding author. Email: Peter.Jones@uOttawa.ca

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and certain allies should “focus on certain capabilities,” since “not all nations can afford or need all capabilities.”

Canada is one NATO member that could seriously consider this call for greater specialisation and niche roles. Canadian defence spending has markedly increased in recent years and the Department of National Defence (DND) has acquired a number of new platforms for the Canadian Forces (CF). Planned defence expenditures, however, will be insufficient to modernise or replace a significant portion of the military’s existing capabilities. In an effort to address this problem, the CF are implementing a series of cost-saving initiatives. Even with reduced costs resulting from the upcoming withdrawal from Canada’s combat mission in Afghanistan, it is doubtful whether these initiatives can free enough funding to allow for a full recapitalisation of the CF. Unless there are substantial further increases in the Canadian defence budget, a possibility that neither the governing Conservative Party nor the opposition New Democratic Party currently supports, DND and the CF will be forced either to eliminate certain capabilities or curtail spending in other areas, such as operations and readiness, if they wish to preserve a semblance of the Canadian military’s existing force structure.

If it wishes to be able to continue to make contributions to allied operations, Canada faces two choices: make a sustained increase to its defence budget or consider the option of re-evaluating the capability requirements of its armed forces and fielding a more specialised military. The preference of the authors would be for the first, but may be politically impossible. Although the second choice would circumscribe Canada’s options for future contributions to allied operations, it would lead to a more realistic and sustainable Canadian defence posture and a CF that is well-equipped to provide valuable niche capabilities on future allied missions. If, on the other hand, the Canadian government insists on trying to retain a multi-purpose military without augmenting projected defence expenditures, the CF risk being an overstretched, unfocused, and a less-effective allied force. Indeed, the Canadian government has declared that the CF will continue to play a leading role in future NATO operations, but this goal may be undermined by unsustainable force structuring policies in the coming decades.

Canada’s decision has implications beyond its borders. Though the CF are relatively small, they are highly professional. Moreover, successive Canadian governments of different political persuasion have shown that Canada is amongst a select group who are prepared to place their forces on the front line of Alliance actions. In the Balkans, in Afghanistan, and more recently in air operations over Libya, Canada has shouldered a disproportionate share of the fighting, while other, and often larger, allies have shied away. If Canada’s military capabilities were to be diminished, either by choice or by a gradual whittling away of its capability through sustained under-funding, NATO risks losing the capabilities of one of its members who is prepared to fight.

**Canadian defence planning, 1993–2011**

The idea that Canada should field specialised armed forces has been a part of Canadian defence planning discussions for some time. Whereas the appeal of focusing on niche capabilities has occasionally been strong, a preference for multi-purpose forces, coupled with timely infusions of new money into the defence budget have counteracted previous efforts to specialise. Indeed, the recent history of Canadian defence planning reads as an effort to avoid making difficult choices about what capabilities to maintain given limited funds. The government will find it increasingly difficult to continue to avoid making these choices.

In the early 1990s, Canada was in a dire financial situation. The federal government’s budget deficits and debt were ruinous, threatening the country’s credit rating and economic prosperity. Determined to address this problem, in 1993 Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s newly elected Liberal Party vowed to reduce government spending. Although nearly all federal departments
and programmes were targeted, the government decided that DND and the CF would bear a disproportionate share. As the largest source of discretionary spending, defence expenditures were especially vulnerable, particularly when the threat posed by the Soviet Union had evaporated and many NATO allies were actively seeking a peace dividend. Within a few months of their election, the Liberals announced that a new defence policy would be written, with the principal aim of reducing Canada’s military expenditures by approximately 30%. It was clear to observers that the content of the new policy was of secondary importance; what mattered most was that it achieved the necessary budgetary reductions.6

Defence planners approached the mandated review determined to preserve a general purpose force. While the budget cuts sought by the government meant that certain units and platforms had to be abandoned, defence officials hoped that a reduced Canadian military could still operate alongside allies across a wide spectrum of conflict at sea, on land, and in the air. Core capabilities and competencies would therefore be preserved, albeit in an emaciated form. Once Canada’s fiscal crisis passed and a reinvestment in defence took place, this skeletal force could serve as the foundation for refurbished CF.7 An influential group of academics and former political officials with close ties to the Liberal Party, however, offered an alternative vision. Known as “Canada 21,” this group saw the defence review as an opportunity to reshape the CF into a lightly armed, peacekeeping, and constabulary force. This kind of specialised force, they argued, would be more affordable and allow Canada to stake out a novel role for Canada’s military. Canada, they hoped, could become a world leader in inter-positional peacekeeping, while greatly reducing defence expenditures.8

“Canada 21’s” proposals were supported by notable members of the Chrétien Cabinet, but the defence department’s plan ultimately prevailed. Released in 1994, the government’s Defence White Paper stated that the CF would remain a “multi-purpose, combat-capable” military, composed of land, maritime, and air forces, able to protect Canada, cooperate with the USA in the defence of North America, and work with allies overseas. The DND pledged that the CF could do so while working with a third less money.9

The next decade put the Defence White Paper to the test and found it wanting.10 A high operational tempo – one of the highest in NATO, in relative terms – put the CF personnel under considerable strain, fuelling a steep decline in morale and retention rates. The capital portion of Canada’s defence budget, furthermore, was consistently underfunded. Many equipment projects were delayed and the lives of several aging platforms were extended. By the turn of the century, analysts worried that the CF had reached a breaking point.11 In 2004, a collection of articles on the future of the CF captured the view of many defence observers with its title, “Canada Without Armed Forces?”. The authors noted that, unless immediate steps were taken to rectify the situation, the armed forces would soon suffer crippling capability shortfalls, inhibiting Canada’s ability to deploy on operations abroad.12 Officials working within DND recognised the problem as well. Working under the assumption that the defence budget would not be increased, it conducted internal research and commissioned studies by outside experts on what roles and capabilities the military could safely abandon. The planners had conceded that a multi-purpose force was not sustainable, given the size of DND’s budget.13

By mid-decade, Canada had turned a fiscal corner. Faced with the prospect of losing the military as a credible instrument of foreign policy and blessed by this time with a growing budgetary surplus, Canada’s new Prime Minister, Paul Martin, decided that a reinvestment in the military was in order. In addition to the improved fiscal situation, Martin was generally less sceptical of the need for Canada to spend more money on defence than Chrétien, but, before committing any additional money, he demanded the formulation of a new, innovative defence policy. After a series of delays and internal squabbles, DND and military leaders managed to produce a policy that met Martin’s expectations.14
The 2005 *Defence Policy Statement* announced that the CF would be reconfigured into a lighter, joint force composed of two types of formations: a rapidly deployable, contingency task force for short missions and emergencies; and mission-specific task forces that could be tailored for particular operations and remain in theatre for long periods. While the policy statement paid homage to the traditional roles and capabilities of the Canadian navy and air force, it was evident that these armed forces would be army-centric. Of the three services, only the army would grow in numbers and priority was given to the honing of capabilities and procurement of equipment that would bolster and support land forces. Notably, the navy’s two antiquated replenishment ships were to be replaced with three elaborate support ships meant to provide sea-lift, project forces ashore, and support operations on land. Likewise, the need to acquire new tactical-lift planes and medium- to heavy-lift helicopters to facilitate army operations was stressed. Although the term was not used, the *Defence Policy Statement* represented an effort to “specialise.”

A few months after the *Defence Policy Statement*, a new minority Conservative government was elected, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. While the Harper Conservatives were prepared to follow through on Martin’s promise to reinvest in the military, they were also determined to pursue their own defence agenda. To that end, they declared that the military would devote more resources to the defence of the Canadian Arctic. They also directed DND, in the context of the Afghan campaign, to buy four C-17 strategic-lift aircraft and Leopard II main battle tanks, two platforms that had been eschewed in the *Defence Policy Statement*. Although the Conservatives followed through with other procurement programmes that had been initiated by their predecessors, the proposal to restructure the armed forces along two army-centric formations was quietly abandoned. The vision of a more specialised, army-focused CF was therefore stillborn.

In 2008, the Harper government released the *Canada First Defence Strategy*, its blueprint of the future Canadian military. It revived the principle that the CF should be a general purpose force. “The CF,” the *Strategy* states, “will need to be a fully integrated, flexible, multi-role and combat-capable military.” To achieve this objective, the *Strategy* aimed to replace the “core equipment fleets” of all three services in the coming decades, keep the CF at 70,000 regular force personnel and 30,000 reservists, and enhance the military’s capabilities in select areas, such as coastal and Arctic defence. To fund these programmes, the Conservatives pledged, in addition to the increases initiated by the Martin Liberals, that Canada’s defence expenditure would grow by 2% annually over the next 20 years. This figure, however, would barely keep pace with inflation, let alone defence-specific inflation, though the Conservative government has been confident that there are sufficient funds to recapitalise the existing CF force structure.

Recently, a gap between the *Canada First Defence Strategy*’s procurement programme and projected capital expenditures has become evident. According to the *Strategy*, Canada will spend approximately $23–30 billion Canadian dollars to replace the CF’s core equipment between 2008 and 2028. This is meant to cover the initial procurement costs of new maritime patrol and fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft, 15 warships, 2 or 3 naval replenishment ships, 6–8 Arctic/offshore patrol vessels, 65 fighter aircraft, and an array of army support vehicles and combat systems. As Scott Bellard, an American diplomat posted in Ottawa, predicted, the *Strategy*’s figures are unrealistic and based on questionable programme estimates. Evidence of the government’s unrealistic estimates is seen in three on-going procurement programmes. In May 2008, the navy’s Joint Support Ship programme foundered when officials at DND and Industry Canada concluded that the amount allocated to procure these vessels was insufficient. Their true cost had clearly been underestimated. Then, in the summer of 2010, the Conservative government announced that it planned to acquire 65 F-35A Joint Strike Fighters at a total lifecycle cost of $16 billion. American observers and Canada’s Parliamentary Budget...
Office both quickly warned that this amount was far too optimistic. Indeed, these critics worry that the per unit cost of each F-35A will double DND estimates. With the acquisition of new warships, maritime patrol aircraft, and army combat system still years away and likely to increase over time, it appears that the Conservative government failed to calculate accurately the amount of money required to retain the general purpose force as outlined in the *Canada First Defence Strategy*.

Personnel costs are further endangering the sustainability of Canada’s future forces. The budgetary distribution presented in the *Canada First Defence Strategy* assumed that personnel will account for 50% of total defence expenditure. This fairly high number quickly increased after the document was released. If left unchecked, these personnel costs will sap funds away from other spending categories, such as operations and capital equipment. In an effort to control these mounting expenses, the Harper government directed the Chief of CF Transformation, Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie, to review the military’s personnel, infrastructure, and headquarters requirements and recommend potential efficiencies.

The so-called “Leslie Report” was tabled in the summer of 2011. Though it was not officially released to the public, the government eventually posted the report online after several copies had been leaked to the media. The Report calls for a substantial revision in the way DND does business. Its main findings were that, in the period 2004–2010, National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) personnel costs grew by 18% whereas the number of people in the forces grew by only 11% and the civilian bureaucracy by some 33%. Furthermore, DND’s reliance on outside contractors and consultants had grown to some $2.7 billion per year. Leslie found that, while the original intent of many of these developments had been to free up regular force personnel for “the sharp end,” many of them were not saving money, and, of those that were, the bulk of the freed-up resources were being ploughed into further positions at NDHQ. Amongst the more controversial aspects of the Leslie Report were its recommendations that 3500 regular force personnel be either re-assigned or eliminated from jobs that serve little purpose in terms of supporting the CF’s fighting force; that an equal number of civil servant positions also be eliminated through the amalgamation of overlapping bureaucratic organisations; that the number of reservists in full-time service in desk jobs be cut by 4500 while the number of reservists in the field be increased by a similar amount; and that some 30% be cut from the budget devoted to contractors and consultants. To date, though, this initiative has failed to overcome obstacles to reform within NDHQ and the military’s operational commands.

Notwithstanding steady increases in defence spending, it therefore appears that the Canadian government is not investing enough to sustain the multi-purpose force described in the *Canada First Defence Strategy*. Unless the government is prepared to sacrifice readiness or strictly limit operations to recapitalise core equipment fleets and underwrite growing personnel costs, the military will experience important capability shortfalls over the next decades. However, the CF’s operational tempo over the last 20 years suggests that the Canadian government is unlikely to send the military on fewer deployments in the future. In fact, Canada’s major political parties are in agreement that the CF should continue to actively deploy on NATO and/or United Nations operations around the world. While it might be a logical course of action, a prolonged operational pause seems unlikely, particularly at a time when the Canadian government feels it has reaped rewards from its more “muscular” contributions to allied operations in Afghanistan and Libya.

The Conservative government, furthermore, has begun signing agreements with seven foreign states to establish CF support depots on their territories. These will facilitate Canadian military logistics on operations across the globe. The first such agreement was signed between Canada and Kuwait in the summer of 2011. Although they will be fairly limited in size, these foreign support hubs reflect a clear intent to keep the Canadian military actively deployed on international operations in the foreseeable future.
There is another way to reduce costs: cutting infrastructure. The defence department and CF currently own approximately 20,000 buildings across the country. Although the size of the Canadian landmass helps to account for the number of installations the military maintains, considerable savings and efficiencies could be found by reducing them, another of the recommendations of the Leslie Report. In truth, entire CF bases could arguably be closed without affecting the military’s operational effectiveness within Canada or internationally. Past attempts to close unnecessary bases, however, have been quite controversial, owing to the economic stability they provide to many communities. Hence, although the defence department is reportedly looking at ways to cut infrastructure costs, there is little reason to assume that the political will required to generate significant cost saving will emerge. Instead, Canada’s major political parties are advocating policies, such as opening a deep-water port in the Arctic and expanding the CF’s military colleges, which would increase DND’s infrastructure costs.

Confronted with these realities, it is tempting to argue that Canada should spend more on the CF. Canada, after all, devotes only small portion of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defence, less than 1.5%. Increasing defence expenditures to approximately 2% of GDP would not be especially taxing on the Canadian economy. In truth, future governments may well decide to do so once they accept that it is required to maintain a readily deployable general purpose force. Currently neither the governing Conservative Party nor the opposition New Democratic Party are promising further increases in the defence budget. Quite the contrary: both parties are committed to capping defence expenditures in order to address the federal budget deficit. Although party platforms are subject to change, there is presently a consensus against spending a good deal more on the military.

Canada must therefore consider some hard choices. If the Canadian government is not prepared to markedly increase defence expenditures over a sustained period of time, the defence department must reduce readiness or constrain future deployments to preserve the CF’s existing set of capabilities. None of the major political parties has endorsed this option, either. This leaves the option of specialising the CF, as was briefly considered in 2005 and as the current NATO Strategic Concept and Secretary General have recommended. Specialisation would reduce the cost of recapitalising and maintaining certain equipment fleets, and, depending on how it was done, could restrain personnel expenditures. This would help to make the CF’s future force affordable and sustainable. Of course, specialising the CF would restrict the range of operations on which the military could be deployed. But this might have the added advantage of containing deployment and readiness costs, while still permitting the CF to make valued contributions to allied operations. In the absence of a bipartisan and long-term commitment to increase defence expenditures, specialisation arguably offers a viable solution to Canada’s recurring defence planning dilemma.

**Canada’s specialisation options**

Canada’s basic defence requirements place conditions on the degree of specialisation DND can pursue. At a minimum, the CF must be able to monitor and defend Canada’s maritime approaches and coastlines, conduct search and rescue across the country and in Canadian waters, and be able to deploy units across the country to perform a series of functions known in Canadian constitutional terms as “aid to the civil power” (which includes being ready to assist the civilian authorities in the maintenance of the constitutional order and engaging in disaster relief operations to protect the lives and property of Canadians). In addition, as per the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) agreement, the Canadian military must defend the continent’s airspace in cooperation with the USA. The future CF must, at the very least, have the capabilities required to fulfil these roles. In practical terms, this means that the CF cannot make do without maritime patrol and search and rescue aircraft, tactical airlift, fighter aircraft able to defend
North American airspace, coastal defence ships, and units trained and equipped to aid the civil power.

Beyond these homeland and continental defence obligations, the CF’s roles and missions are largely discretionary. As a NATO ally, Canada has committed to contributing to the collective defence of Alliance members. But the nature and extent of this contribution is unspecified and unlikely to require combat capability in Europe unless relations between NATO and Russia completely break down. Similarly, although Canada has an interest in a stable international environment and is routinely asked to take part in NATO and American-led operations aiming to protect global peace and security, the Canadian government is free to decide how the CF will take part in such efforts, if at all. When exploring what capabilities the Canadian military could do without, and which they might emphasise, it is necessary to look first at capabilities that the CF will need for its domestic duties, which are the minimum tasks that must be performed, and then assess how these core functions can be augmented to contribute to allied operations overseas. Also, in line with NATO’s Strategic Concept, a specialised CF should ideally field capabilities that the Alliance lacks or that certain allies have been reluctant to use.

Any discussion of niche capabilities must also take note of which platforms were recently acquired for the CF. Given DND’s modest capital equipment budget, it would be wasteful to cast aside platforms it has recently acquired. Although this approach might be criticised as a sunk cost fallacy, military procurements do impose a degree of path dependency on the Canadian defence planners. Thankfully, as the Canada First Defence Strategy makes clear, DND has barely begun the process of replacing the CF’s major equipment fleets. This leaves Canada with ample choice when contemplating what niche expeditionary capabilities a future CF could offer. Even in the case of the recently selected ship-building yards of 2011, it will take years before the first contracts are signed and ships are actually built, leaving ample time for amendments and reconsiderations.

With these various constraints and opportunities in mind, we envisage three possible specialisation options for the expeditionary component of the CF. The first would be a Canadian military focused on transport and the projection of air power; the second would be a CF specialised in transport and the projection of sea power; and the third would be an army-centric force.

**Transport and air power**

Recent Canadian defence procurements have improved the CF’s tactical and strategic airlift capabilities. DND has acquired 17 C-130J Hercules tactical airlift planes and four C-17 Globemasters. Given the lack of strategic airlift within NATO, the procurement of the C-17s has served Canada and the Alliance well. Indeed, recognising that a Canadian strategic lift capability would ease demands on its own strategic airlift capabilities, the USA helped accelerate DND’s acquisition of the C-17s and ensured that CF pilots were quickly trained to fly them. Canada’s strategic airlift capability remains limited, however. With only four C-17s, Canada’s air force is unable to guarantee that one of these aircraft is always ready to deploy. This suggests that Canada could build on this nascent capability to further address NATO’s strategic airlift needs. Doing so would allow the CF to provide a valuable niche capability within the Alliance. Were DND to replace the navy’s two aging replenishment ships with vessels capable of providing sea-lift, furthermore, Canada could also bolster NATO’s maritime logistics.

DND could then complement these air- and sealift assets with the planned procurement of 65 (or perhaps more) F-35A Joint Strike Fighters. As demonstrated during the Kosovo air campaign and recent air operations over Libya, Canada, unlike many other NATO allies, has not shied away from taking part in bombing campaigns. Acquiring modern fighter aircraft with precision bombing capability and stealth would allow Canada to continue to take part in air operations that several allies are reluctant to join. Seen from this perspective, a fleet of Canadian F-35As
would count as a valuable niche capability within the Alliance. As importantly, these aircraft would also fulfil Canada’s NORAD obligations, though they would bring far more to the table than the NORAD air defence mission requires.

There would admittedly be downsides associated with this type of specialisation. The Canadian army would be restricted to constabulary homeland and continental defence missions, perhaps with some exceptions made for small, low-intensity peacekeeping deployments. Likewise, aside from sealift, the navy would gradually forgo a global presence and concentrate on coastal and Arctic defence. But, unless defence expenditures significantly increase, these would be necessary sacrifices.

Transport and sea power

A second specialisation option involves augmenting the CF’s transport capabilities as per the above, but complementing them with a fleet of modern naval combatants rather than fifth-generation fighter aircraft. Canada’s current maritime forces perform a variety of roles and there is no question that a blue-water navy offers the government a versatile set of capabilities that can be employed to achieve many different objectives at sea. Newer surface combatants would enhance the flexibility of these forces and extend their capabilities. Open architectures and modular systems will allow new surface combatants to be tailored for particular missions and operations, and they are expected to stay at sea without refuelling for longer periods. In addition, these features will simplify life-extensions and reduce crew sizes, which will contribute to cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Each of these considerations makes sea power an attractive niche for the future CF.

The US government has made partnerships with allied naval forces a pillar of its global maritime strategy. A sea-centric expeditionary CF would enable Canada to make noteworthy contributions to this collaborative maritime effort. In the past decade alone, the Canadian navy has worked closely with the USA and other allies in securing the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, combating piracy off the coast of Somalia, interdicting vessels suspected of transporting members of Al-Qaeda or transporting weapons of mass destruction, enforcing the maritime exclusion zone along the Libyan coast, and protecting vital sea lanes of communication. Pursuing this specialisation option would guarantee that the CF has the maritime forces required to make comparable contributions for decades to come.

Emphasising transport and sea power would again mean restricting the Canadian army to homeland and continental defence duties and low-intensity peacekeeping. Following this specialisation model would also mean gradually abandoning an expeditionary role for Canadian fighter aircraft in the most exacting tasks of air power projection. Instead of acquiring expensive, multi-role fifth-generation fighters, DND would eventually replace the CF’s existing F-18As with a smaller number of less-expensive fighters optimised for the air defence role only in order to fulfil Canada’s NORAD obligations.

Land-centric force

Reviving the 2005 Defence Policy Statement’s idea of land-centric force would be a third specialisation option for the CF. Canada’s six-year deployment to Kandahar, Afghanistan, has refined the CF’s land warfare capabilities, and the Canadian army now counts a good number of combat veterans within its ranks. Afghanistan has also improved the CF’s understanding of counterinsurgency operations and multinational state-building efforts. This experience could be leveraged to build a still more effective land-centric force, one capable of operating independently and alongside allies across a spectrum of conflict ranging from peace support operations to mid-intensity combat.
Recent procurements accord well with a future emphasis on land forces, too. The military’s fleet of tactical- and strategic-lift aircraft allows the CF to deploy a small number of land forces on various operations for limited periods of time, and medium- to heavy-lift helicopters were bought to ensure that the army could safely move people and equipment in theatre. The acquisition of Leopard II main battle tanks, furthermore, has strengthened the army’s direct fire capability. If the replacement of the army’s other vehicles and combat systems – all of which have been exhausted by the Afghan campaign – were to proceed as planned, the CF would be able to deploy a small but well-equipped, infantry-centric, medium-weight land force on allied operations in the coming decades.

The value of offering this type of niche contribution to allied operations is strong. NATO’s mission in Afghanistan has shown that many Alliance members are reluctant to commit their land forces to operations involving combat or a high-risk of casualties. As a result, the burden of undertaking these operations has fallen on a select set of allies. It is not unlikely that a similar division of labour will emerge on future missions. Assuming that this trend continues, land forces that can be deployed without caveats and operate across the spectrum of conflict will be prized by the Alliance.

Finally, under this land-centric rubric, Canada’s navy would be principally tasked with coastal defence, and a less-expensive air defence fighter aircraft would be bought to fulfil the CF’s continental air defence duties. Select land units would also be kept in Canada at any given time to address domestic emergencies.

Specialisation obstacles and status quo risks

Defence planners are likely to oppose a renewed effort to specialise the Canadian military. They have good reasons to be wary of niche capabilities. A capability cannot be easily reacquired once it has been abandoned, and it is difficult to predict which capabilities the CF will be asked to contribute to allied operations over the next decades. Put simply, choosing the wrong niche could marginalise Canada’s ability to contribute to future allied operations. For example, and while we have no reason to expect this would be so, if China’s future rise is not as peaceful as hoped, an army-centric CF will be of relatively little help in a situation where naval capabilities will be of primary interest. Moreover, it must be noted that international affairs experts have a rather dubious record of predicting major changes in the international landscape, from the end of the Cold War to the outbreak of the “Arab Spring.”

Defence officials and senior officers also fear that future political leaders will fail to respect the limits that specialisation would place on the CF’s expeditionary capabilities and order certain units to deploy on international missions without the proper training and equipment. Finally, there is the perceptual problem of a G8 country going down the specialisation path when smaller economic powers, such as Australia and The Netherlands, are committed to retaining combat capabilities across all three services. Retaining a general purpose force evades these problems. It ensures that the CF force structure is able to complete a wide variety of missions, make many different contributions to allied operations, and satisfy the ever-changing demands of decision-makers.

A commitment to general purpose forces minimises conflicts within the armed forces as well. Talk of specialisation and niche capabilities will likely fuel rivalries between the CF’s three services. All three services define themselves, to a large extent, through their global roles and capabilities, and no one is prepared to abandon their expeditionary focus in order to concentrate on domestic and continental missions, particularly if one of their sister services is not forced to do the same. All other things being equal, this is an outcome that military leaders and defence officials would rather avoid. Expressing a common preference for general purpose forces helps avert such a clash between the services.
Finally, many within the CF and defence department probably expect that the Conservative government will eventually invest enough in the military to afford the capital equipment programme outlined in the Canada First Defence Strategy. In May 2011, the Conservative Party was re-elected with a majority of the seats in the House of Commons. Now that the Conservatives can govern without the cooperation of one of the opposition parties, it may be easier to augment Canada’s defence expenditures, particularly once the federal deficit has been eliminated. With this optimistic prospect in mind, DND and the CF may be tempted to continue muddling through, procuring some new equipment when possible and delaying other acquisitions, while waiting for the day when additional funds might arrive. This could be one of the reasons why the senior ranks of the CF have been lukewarm to the Leslie Report. Some military leaders may also interpret the Conservatives’ move to reinstate the former “royal” names of the navy and air force as evidence of an intrinsic sympathy for defence on the part of this government, even though it was a cost-free and largely symbolic step.49

Each of these rationales for maintaining a general purpose force is understandable. But they are also fraught with risk. If Canada’s defence spending is not significantly increased in the coming years, and a period of prolonged global economic stagnation seems in prospect, the CF will undergo a gradual overall capability decline. Rather than experiencing a planned specialisation, the Canadian military will lose and retain capabilities in ad hoc fashion, depending on which capital programmes happen to go forward and which are allowed to lapse. The rationales for this will probably have little to do with well thought-out strategic choices, but rather with the political expediency of any given moment, and arguments over industrial and regional benefits.50

Should this occur, the CF will both lose the flexibility of a general purpose force and be left without a coherent set of niche capabilities. This would undermine the quality of CF’s future contributions to allied operations even more than specialisation. Tensions between the services will intensify, too, as each competes to have their procurement projects approved before DND’s capital equipment budget is entirely committed. Lastly, the Conservative government might disappoint the defence community by not augmenting defence expenditures to the degree required, once it has tackled the budget deficit. In fact, a Conservative government may prove less sympathetic toward the CF if its efforts to balance the federal budget take longer than expected, and it comes to the conclusion that it may lose a future election to a left-leaning party that will not make national defence a spending priority. However tempting, simply muddling through could, in light of these considerations, result in a disjointed and far less capable CF.

Conclusion
The strong preference of the authors is for the maintenance of general purpose combat capabilities across all three services; this is a realistic and attainable for a country of the size and wealth of Canada if a national consensus can be forged around this goal. But future governments may not approve this option or be prepared to make the case to the Canadian people for the required continuing investments in defence. A planned specialisation of the Canadian military is thus something that should be examined.

Whereas the development of niche capabilities would reduce the military’s flexibility and heighten tensions between the services in the short term, specialisation would guarantee that the future CF is affordable and properly equipped and trained to perform the roles that it has been assigned. A niched CF, moreover, could be designed to make highly valued contributions to allied operations overseas, which could compensate, to at least some degree, for the versatility offered by the CF’s current force structure. Hence, unless current trends are unexpectedly reversed and defence spending is permitted to markedly increase, a specialised CF composed of niche
expeditionary capabilities is an option that the Canadian government should consider in accordance with the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept and the suggestions of the Secretary General.

Notes
5. Peter Jones, ‘Canada more than pulls its weight in NATO’, Ottawa Citizen, October 25, 2011.
13. One of the authors of this article, Philippe Lagassé, was commissioned to co-author one of these studies by the Assistant Deputy Minister (Policy), Department of National Defence in May 2004.
17. Although it was recently announced that the regular Force would be maintained at 68,000 until 2015. See Department of National Defence, Report on Plans and Priorities, 2011–2012 (Ottawa, 2011), section 1.
18. Canada, Department of National Defence, Canada First Defence Strategy (Ottawa, 2008).
21. Furthermore, according to the Strategy, the total life-cycle cost of the major fleets is between $45 and 50 billion Canadian dollars. This figure has also been disputed as unrealistic.


32. David Pugliese, ‘Defence Department looks to freeze size of regular force, sell off property’, Vancouver Sun, October 24, 2011.


34. Canada, Senate, Standing Committee on National Security and Defence, Managing Turmoil: The Need to Upgrade Canadian Foreign Aid and Military Strength to Deal with Massive Change (Ottawa, 2006).


45. McFadden, ‘The Navy and Canada’s National Interests’.

46. Of note, the Canadian government recently signed a contract with General Dynamics to refurbish the Army’s existing fleet of LAV IIIs. See Peter O’Neil, ‘Canadian government to spend $1.1 billion on combat vehicles’, Vancouver Sun, October 25, 2011. Contracts for additional land vehicles announced in 2009 appear to have been delayed.


