

THE STRATEGIC MOBILITY CONUNDRUM

An eclectic assortment of peacebuilding, peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations — in venues as diverse as Kosovo, East Timor, Africa and Turkey — have once again underscored the international community's pressing requirement for what a British Ministry of Defence paper has rather clinically, but accurately, termed "strategic movement assets."

Canada is no exception to the NATO-wide re-evaluation of deployment strategies. Recent statements by the Minister and senior officers, not to mention *Defence Planning Guidance 2000*, positively drip with references to global deployability, rapid response, and enhanced airlift and sealift. As the CDS has noted, "we must continue to improve our ability to deploy anywhere in the world. This not only includes improving our air- and sea-lift capability, but also our combat preparedness and the sustainability of our forces. During the Cold War, much of our equipment was pre-positioned in Europe. We do not have the luxury any more of knowing where we will be deployed. Our ability to be effective will often depend upon how quickly we can arrive on the ground."

Although sceptics will quickly, and correctly, point out that investments, potentially substantial investments, in enhanced airlift and sealift will only make sense if the army and other equipment we wish to deploy is actually *worth* deploying, few defence analysts would take umbrage at DND's quest for enhanced global deployability. Such is the inherent flexibility of modern airlift and sealift that even the most dedicated devotees of soft power and human security may find the case reasonably compelling. The real challenge is to identify an asset mix which is both credible and affordable.

The rhetoric and the conundrums of rapid deployment are not new. Paul Hellyer's 1964 White Paper, for example, stressed that "the emphasis in our force structure is on greatly increased mobility," and concluded that it would be necessary to "substantially augment our existing air transport capability." Comparatively large numbers of CC-130Es, the same CC-130Es which today constitute the core of our *Hercules* fleet, quickly followed. Canada also came tantalizingly close to acquiring Lockheed's C-141A *Starlifter*, but the putative order for four aircraft was too small to justify reopening the production line. If the expansion of the *Hercules* fleet was one of the most cost-effective decisions in the convoluted history of Canadian defence procurement, the failure to acquire the *Starlifter* — which would have revolutionized Canada's military airlift capability — was surely one of the greatest blunders.

The 1964 White Paper also announced that "a modest additional sealift [capability] will be acquired either in conjunction with the anti-submarine force or independently." The two resulting *Protecteur*-class AORs possessed extremely limited sealift capabilities, but this was partially offset by the cargo-carrying potential — usefully demonstrated during the UNFICYP deployment to Cyprus — of the light fleet carrier *Bonaventure*.

Decades later, the Canadian airlift and sealift balance sheet appears remarkably — and distressingly — little changed. The *Bonaventure* is long gone, but *Protecteur* and *Preserver*, still sealift-challenged and still handicapped by their limited joint force support capabilities, remain vital, if flawed, assets. The hard-worked Hercules fleet, now 32-aircraft strong — one of the largest such fleets in the world — remains, in partially upgraded form, the backbone of Canada's military air transport system. The *Hercules* absorbed some cheap shots from the media during the East Timor operation, but the type is aging and, as a medium-range tactical transport, unable to haul the outsize cargo which is increasingly required to support Canada's diverse and far-flung commitments.

If one eschews further upgrades of the *Hercules*, and confines the search for a successor (or successors) to types now in production, the field rapidly narrows to the latest iteration of the *Hercules*, the C-130J, and Boeing's C-17A. Phased acquisition of the C-130J has obvious attractions, including ease of assimilation and performance and productivity gains which would permit something less than one-for-one replacement. A variation incorporating a much smaller buy of C-130Js, and the acquisition, by lease or purchase, of four or five C-17As is worth serious consideration, but the eye-watering performance of the C-17A comes at an eye-watering price. There is also a quantitative limit below which the *Hercules* fleet cannot shrink. Other options include the Airbus A400M (more than a C-130J, less than a C-17A, but not yet committed to production), spot leasing from private contractors, and access to allied, or an allied pool, of heavy airlifters. Resource-sharing has advantages, but there is no guarantee that foreign or pooled aircraft would be available when and where needed by Canada.

On the maritime front, the nascent Afloat Logistics and Sealift Capability (ALSC) project continues to explore a hybrid design which could meet replenishment, sealift, in-theatre support to joint forces ashore, humanitarian relief and other requirements. The goal is laudable, but it remains to be seen if an acceptable compromise can be struck between competing demands. Other navies have opted for dedicated replenishment and sealift vessels, but the two-track approach, however attractive from an operational perspective, would be problematic in Canada. Another option, not without support in some domestic naval and academic circles, would be to acquire what are essentially large AORs with ample deck space for containers and other cargo, but without a RO/RO capability. The short-notice chartering of civilian vessels is no panacea.

It is a truism in Canadian defence policy that paper options are far more plentiful than paper money, but it is equally clear that measures, both short- and longer-term, must be taken to enhance our strategic mobility.

Martin Shadwick teaches Canadian defence policy at York University. He is a former editor of *Canadian Defence Quarterly*.