

DEBATING DEFENCE

If the defence policy debate of 2001-2003 is measured in purely quantitative terms, then Canada and Canadians have been exceedingly well served by the seemingly relentless barrage of reports and critiques from academic and public policy research institutes, non-governmental organizations, Parliamentary committees, the Office of the Auditor General and the Department of National Defence (which has become a most prolific publishing house in its own right). Add in extensive media coverage — replete with copious quantities of videotape and innumerable editorials and op-ed pieces — and one should, at least in theory, have the raw materials for a thoroughgoing and intellectually rigorous debate over future directions in Canadian defence and security policy.

The reality, however, is somewhat different. True, we have witnessed the creation of important new actors, such as the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century, and the rediscovery of defence by such stalwarts as the C.D. Howe Institute and the Institute for Research on Public Policy, but it is not clear that the overall intellectual tenor (or inclusiveness) of the current debate has reached particularly high levels or, indeed, the levels of 1993-1994. The debate which preceded the December 1994 White Paper was by no means faultless, but some of the reports from that era — most notably those generated by the Canada 21 Council, the Atlantic Council of Canada and the Parliamentary Special Joint Committee on Canada's Defence policy — became valuable, if controversial, catalysts for debate.

The uneven, at times sterile, nature of the current debate has been evident on several levels, not least the fixation by some critics on the percentage of GDP that Canada devotes to defence spending. As Daniel Bon, the Director General Policy Planning, has correctly observed, such statistics, in isolation, are inherently misleading and tend to understate Canada's defence efforts. The key, he notes, "is how much money you actually spend." Another impediment to high-quality debate, albeit from a different ideological and sociological strata, may be anti-Americanism. As J.L. Granatstein has reminded us, "too many Canadians instinctively see the United States through an anti-American lens and reject any idea of cooperation as a threat to Canada's sovereignty." Indeed, some Canadians may automatically, and unthinkingly, oppose increased defence spending precisely because the United States desires such an increase. In such circles, the argument that increased defence spending might actually enhance Canadian sovereignty is frequently rejected out-of-hand sans meaningful discussion.

Noteworthy, too, are the other differences between the defence publishing surges of 1993-1994 and 2001-2003. While most of the studies and reports from a decade ago offered very specific recommendations on force structure, many of the recent offerings have tended to be niche-specific (i.e., they focus on such issues as operational readiness and the Canada-US defence relationship) and, consequently, leave force structure preferences more implicit than explicit. This tendency is in part a legacy of 9/11 (i.e., continental defence was a very low profile issue in 1993-1994), but it also reflects

the prolonged uncertainty over the scope, time frame and consultation mechanisms of the Chrétien government's second defence 'review' (or, far less ambitiously, its defence 'update'). The uncertainty, which stands in marked contrast to the arrangements surrounding the 1993-1994 review, forced many of the participants in the current debate to divert valuable time and effort from the development of potentially innovative policy and force structure prescriptions to simply making the case for a comprehensive government review of defence policy.

This is not to suggest that force structure options have been entirely absent from the current debate. Indeed, one of the more intriguing contributions was a November 2002 public opinion poll conducted by Ipsos-Reid on behalf of the *Globe and Mail* and the Dominion Institute which invited respondents to choose between three force structure options. Fifty-three percent of the respondents opted for "a better funded and equipped all-purpose armed force capable of undertaking traditional defence and combat roles at home and abroad," 32 percent favoured a force that had been "downsized and reconfigured as a small but well-equipped peacekeeping and disaster-assistance force ready to be deployed anywhere in the world on short notice," and 13 percent favoured a smaller defence establishment "refocused around specialized combat roles such as military engineering, snipers [no surprise where this came from] or special forces." Although such data must be interpreted with extreme caution, it is noteworthy that barely half supported what is essentially the 1994 White Paper model (i.e., multi-purpose combat-capable), that support for niche combat-capable was extremely limited (in spite of its popularity in some government, military and academic circles), and that the Canadian infatuation with peacekeeping — apparently traditional, low-risk peacekeeping — remains firmly entrenched.

As if to prove the timeless quality of many of Canada's defence dilemmas, the options explored by Ipsos-Reid bring to mind the options — in many respects the same options — identified by Professor Rod Byers of York University in the Spring 1975 issue of *International Journal*. Writing prior to the Trudeau government's November 1975 volte-face on defence (i.e., at a time when "the armed forces may be approaching an era where it will not be possible to maintain a combat capability"), Byers criticized "the lack of interest and/or understanding of military issues shown by successive cabinets," highlighted the problems inherent in "constant reorganization, excessive centralization and staffing in headquarters, and over-bureaucratization," and lamented the rising procurement and maintenance costs of new and next-generation weapon systems. He concluded that "a smaller but restructured military establishment, with limited but expert capabilities, is preferable to a larger unbalanced force structure attempting to retain all the traditional components of a conventional military force." Then, as now, the challenge is deciding which "expert capabilities" to retain or acquire.

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