



A Force Disrupted: Re-Considering the Canadian Army for a New Cold War

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JCSP 50

Exercise Solo Flight

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A FORCE DISRUPTED: RE-CONSIDERING THE CANADIAN ARMY FOR A NEW COLD WAR

On 11 April 2024, Canadian defence scholars Philippe Legasse and Justin Massie published a damning account of the current state of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) on the popular American website *War on the Rocks*.¹ Titled *Don't Count on Us: Canada's Military Unreadiness*, the authors' painted an alarming picture of the status of the CAF just days after the release of the Canadian Government's long anticipated Defence Policy Update (DPU), *Our North, Strong and Free*,² and only months after the public announcement of the CAF's ambitious new Pan-Domain Operating Concept (PFEC).³ With reminders of the current fragility of the global security environment remaining front and centre in international news, and with the aforementioned DPU interpreted by some observers as more of a commitment to exploration rather than a robust plan in and of itself,⁴ rarely if ever have the stakes been higher for the CAF to present a compelling vision for itself in service of the national interest.

Amongst the three traditional services of the Canadian Army (CA), Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), it is perhaps the first of these which appears to face the greatest challenge in this regard. This is particularly true at a time of increasing emphasis on the PFEC's inclusion of the domains of space and cyber,⁵ and with future visions of the RCAF and RCN coalescing around costly signature investments in such platforms as the F-35⁶ and Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC).⁷ While in some ways this represents new ground for the CA as "the senior service in historical fact if not in traditional precedence with the Canadian Armed Forces," it also conforms with the historic norm which has seen limited political and electoral support for standing land forces during peacetime.⁸ Furthermore, following the experiences of the early 21st Century in Afghanistan and Iraq, the costliness and associated risk of deploying

¹ Philippe Legasse and Justin Massie, "Don't Count on US: Canada's Military Unreadiness," *War on the Rocks (Online)*, April 11, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/dont-count-on-us-canadas-military-unreadiness/>

² Department of National Defence, *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2024).

³ Sarah Ritchie, "Chief of Defence Staff Says Military Must Switch Gears in Increasingly Chaotic World," *The Globe and Mail (Online)*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-chief-of-defence-staff-says-military-must-switch-gears-in-increasingly/>

⁴ Philippe Legasse and David Perry, "Canada's New Defence Policy Commits to Exploring, Instead of Committing," *The Globe and Mail (Online)*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadas-new-defence-policy-commits-to-exploring-instead-of-committing/>

⁵ Ritchie, "Chief of Defence Staff Says Military Must Switch Gears in Increasingly Chaotic World," *The Globe and Mail (Online)*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-chief-of-defence-staff-says-military-must-switch-gears-in-increasingly/>

⁶ Department of National Defence, *Announcement Regarding the F-35 Acquisition Defence*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/01/announcement-regarding-the-f-35-acquisition.html>

⁷ Department of National Defence, *Canadian surface combatant*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/procurement/canadian-surface-combatant.html>

⁸ John English, *Lament for an Army: The Decline of Canadian Military Professionalism* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1998): xii.

ground forces has come under particular scrutiny among Western electorates and politicians, a fact underscored by the preference for special operations forces (SOF) and air power in confronting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁹

Since the coinciding conclusion of Op ATTENTION in Afghanistan in 2014¹⁰ and the Russian annexation of Crimea that same year, the CA has seemingly sought to seize the opportunity presented by renewed attention on the potential for great power conflict to follow the American lead and re-focus on a relatively narrow conception of Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO)¹¹ as conceived in the US Army's recently updated capstone doctrine.¹² This is perhaps most evident in the Army's current approach to assuming responsibility for a multi-national brigade in Latvia,¹³ one which might critically be interpreted as an overly wishful effort to recapitalize the force and re-discover a unified organizational purpose following Afghanistan and amid a tumultuous period following the COVID-19 pandemic. And while the CA's "return" to Europe and current state of preparations for LSCO may well turn out to be the correct prioritization of scarce resources, what is less evident is whether this relatively limited focus on the conventional battlefield in Europe represents a reasonable course of action rather than instead a predetermined outcome reflective of inherent institutional biases and preferences. It is this topic, as well as alternate perspectives from which other possible visions for the CA might be drawn, which this paper will seek to explore in greater detail.

Stemming from this exploration, it will be argued that the combined impact of a rapidly evolving operating environment and the persistence of archaic organizational behaviours represent a threat to the future utility of the CA that, if not addressed through increasingly urgent changes in framework activities, is likely to negatively impact the Army's relevance as a key pillar of Canada's national security for an emerging new Cold War.¹⁴ To address this challenge the CA must prioritize adaptability and innovation, embrace the full spectrum of conflict including irregular warfare (IW), and return the Army Reserve (ARes) to its foundational importance, and in doing so ensure that both

⁹ Jack Watling, "Old Habits Die Hard: Special Operations Forces, Twenty Years of Counterterrorism, and the New Era of Great Power Competition," *Modern War Institute at West Point (Online)*, June 21, 2021, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/old-habits-die-hard-special-operations-forces-twenty-years-of-counterterrorism-and-the-new-era-of-great-power-competition/>.

¹⁰ Department of National Defence, *Operation ATTENTION*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/recently-completed/operation-attention.html>

¹¹ For consistency the term LSCO is used here rather than NATO's parallel Major Combat Operations (MCO). Based on the author's experience the former of these terms also remains in more frequent use within the CA.

¹² Department of the United States Army, *FM 3-0: Operations*, October 2022.

¹³ Department of National Defence, *Roadmap- Scaling the EFP Latvia Battle Group to Brigade*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/07/roadmap---scaling-the-efp-latvia-battle-group-to-brigade.html>

¹⁴ Though more commonly referred to by the concept of Great Power Competition (GPC) originating from the *2018 US National Defense Strategy*, the notion of a new Cold War will also be referred to throughout this paper in recognition of both the existential nature of the contest as well as the likelihood that it will be decided beyond the traditional battlefield.

Canada and its Army's strengths are effectively leveraged in support of the national interest.

Over the remainder of this paper, this argument will be made in three parts. First, a brief survey of dominant narratives which have come to define CA activities will be made alongside initial consideration of the state of the current threat environment, including threat actor adaptation, technological change and geopolitical considerations, in order to expose the current disconnect between organizational priorities and the actual threat environment. Next, broad implications of this tension will be considered, and with emphasis on how these considerations challenge current organizational perspectives and preferences which risk becoming increasingly maladaptive when viewed in relation to likely key national security challenges of the 21st Century. Finally, the last section of the paper will look to begin to unpack potential alternate courses of action which the CA might consider exploring for both the purposes of internal adoption and to offer to senior CAF and DND leadership as part of wider efforts to modernize the larger Joint Force and ensure that it remains responsive to Canada's evolving defence needs. Ultimately, it is hoped that this effort will offer an alternative perspective through which to view the CA as a component of Canada's national defence architecture, and in doing so contribute to ongoing conversations about what kind of military Canada requires in order to meet the strategic challenges of coming decades.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE WORLD WARS: A FORCE ADRIFT

Any outside visitor to most CA bases could be forgiven for leaving with an insufficient appreciation of the often-contentious history which has characterized the Army experience over much of the past eighty-years. Based if only on a cursory evaluation of the memorials, displays and artistic choices which are shared across the force's main garrison locations, it is undoubtedly the two World Wars of the 20th Century which continue to loom largest in the Army's collective consciousness. This at least in part belies the staying power of a popular historical narrative, detected by Peter Kasurak in his 2013 book *A National Force*, of a highpoint for the CA prior to unification in 1968 and one which has been followed by an uninterrupted period of professional decline attributed to a range of factors including "civilianization," the end of the militia's role as a mobilization force, resource scarcity, and the prioritization of peacekeeping.¹⁵ Regardless of whether or not one accepts this viewpoint, one which Kasurak himself contests, it does seem fair to suggest that the CA has, and continues, to struggle to establish a clear role and identity aligned with the nation's strategic needs and shared with its political leadership. As such it has tended to default to an idealized view of itself as a balanced combined arms force, capable of maintaining pace with larger allies such as the US and UK, while also flexible enough to serve in an array of different roles outside of high-intensity armed conflict. The perhaps inevitable result is a force which today neither appears fit for its historic purpose of preparing for and mobilizing in time of war,

¹⁵ Peter Kasurak, *A National Force: The Evolution of Canada's Army, 1950-2000* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013): 7.

nor the IW¹⁶ role which has predominated its expeditionary employment over much of the past century.

Together, the combination of this self-perception and dominant external influences can be seen as having come to manifest in a narrow and distorted view of the contemporary role of the CA, one which can be observed in the form of a number of limiting beliefs which have acted to constrain both the Army's actual and articulated value proposition as a critical component of Canada's national security architecture. Specifically, this narrative can be reduced to three core assumptions which can be seen to underpin key organizational behaviors and can also be observed in parts of the Army's capstone operating concept, *Close Engagement*. First of these is that the CA's foundational purpose is to contribute as part of a multinational coalition to deterring, and, if necessary, fighting expeditionary wars at the brigade group level against a like adversary and under conditions that can in general be anticipated based on current assessments of the future operating environment.¹⁷ Second, is that its current force structure, force generation, force management and force sustainment models remain relevant to these ends so long as force development efforts are able to deliver the technological solutions required to achieve the connectivity, adaptability, integration and robustness envisioned in *Close Engagement*.¹⁸ Finally, the third assumption is that non-traditional warfare, or IW as described earlier, is subordinate and secondary to the conventional battlefield and that, when and if necessary, the Army can temporary shift focus in order to both participate in and contribute to winning such forms of conflict prior to returning focus to its foundational purpose.¹⁹

Looking beyond *Close Engagement*, how these underlying beliefs have come to manifest in what is characterized here as an archaic approach to how the Army conducts itself on a routine basis can be seen in various examples, two of which are particularly illustrative. First, the CA appears to have become paralyzed by an organizational fixation on conducting and measuring individual and collective training competences as outlined in individual and collective training standards which are onerous to update, reflect an unnecessarily rigid vision of future conflict, and from which unit and formation leadership have limited authority to vary,²⁰ in turn resulting in a force more optimized to

¹⁶ Seen here as referring "to activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country's influence and legitimacy, as well as weaken its adversaries" in accordance with the definition put forward by Seth Jones in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy* edited by Hal Brands. As has been observed by numerous scholars, including Pelleriti, Maloney, Cox, Sullivan, Piskura and Hawkins in their 2019 article *The Insufficiency of US Irregular Warfare Doctrine*, IW is a less than perfect concept for addressing the forms of warfare which fall outside traditional Western conceptions. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper it is used in recognition of its predominant use in modern parlance, including the IW Annex of the *2020 US National Defence Strategy*, as well as the lack of a more widely accepted alternative.

¹⁷ Canadian Army, *Close Engagement: Land Power in an Age of Uncertainty* (Kingston: Canadian Army Land Warfare Centre, 2019): 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 20-21.

¹⁹ This is taken as implied based on the lack of a unified and consistent approach to this topic in *Close Engagement*, and with hybrid, unconventional and irregular all mentioned at various points in the document.

²⁰ This challenge is perhaps best articulated in Wong and Gerras 2015 *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*, in which they address the ethical consequences of a US Army that demands more of

“win” its own training events than prevail under actual conditions of sustained combat. Second is that, at least in part as a result of over indexing against centrally directed and measured training standards, the Army has chronically under resourced the other two pillars of professional development, educational and experiential.²¹ The perhaps inevitable consequence has been to remain largely ill equipped to adapt and innovate in any meaningful way despite consistent leadership messaging that these things are in fact important, and as a result remain susceptible to the sort of “unquestionable acceptance of American ideas” which Howard Coombs observed over a decade ago.²² Ultimately, the imbalance reflected by these examples has resulted in an Army which is likely to continue to struggle to mature beyond its current status, optimized for set-piece training events and remaining largely intellectually dependent on larger allies for the thinking and innovation needed to maintain its already minimalist role untethered from national strategic requirements.

Seen in isolation, it would be understandable if these examples and the associated overriding narrative were to appear as the natural order for observers indoctrinated into this environment. This however perhaps says more about stagnation and decline in professional military thinking bemoaned by John English in his 1998 publication *Lament for an Army*,²³ and since added to by the continued triumphalism in post-Cold War thinking which might best be described as the military equivalent of Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History* argument which celebrated the final and decisive triumph of the West.²⁴ Conversely however, the end of the Cold War and the conflicts which followed in its wake have unleashed a cycle of adversary adaption which, in tandem with technological change, has transformed the threat environment and in doing so demanded a reappraisal of Western military forces including the CA. Throughout this period, while Canada and its allies lurched between missions ranging from the peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions of the 1990s to the post-9/11 War on Terror, both state and non-state adversaries committed themselves to the necessary thought and action needed to adapt for future conflict and in doing so have profoundly challenged the pinnacle of Western pre-dominance epitomized by the 1991 Gulf War and masterfully articulated by David Killcullen in his 2020 book *The Dragons and the Snakes*.²⁵

And while the specific nature and characteristics of this adaption have varied amongst threat actors, specifically China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and the Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) described by H.R. McMaster in *Battlegrounds*,²⁶ it is three aspects which stand out, as well as ways in which these have converged with

its personnel than can realistically be accomplished with given resources. Parallels to the CA experience are undeniable.

²¹ Department of National Defence, B-GL-300-008/FP-001, *Training for Land Operations* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2014).

²² Howard Coombs, “In the Wake of a Paradigm Shift: The Canadian Forces College and the Operational Level of War,” *Canadian Military Journal* 10, no. 2 (2010): 26.

²³ English, *Lament for an Army*, 1-7.

²⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (The Free Press, 2006), introduction, Libby.

²⁵ David Killcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 38-65.

²⁶ H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (Harper Collins, 2020), intro., Libby.

technological change and emerging geopolitical trends to help outline what are likely to be key features of both the current and future threat environment. First is that threat actors have continued to invest in nuclear capability,²⁷ in turn suggesting that some form of nuclear deterrence will remain a feature of the new Cold War and that this will continue to be a key driver of irregular conflict.²⁸ Second, these same threat actors have invested in capitalizing on broad conceptions of warfare which leverage key aspects of information age technology and are perhaps best exemplified by the concept of *Unrestricted Warfare* described in the 2002 book by the same name,²⁹ which under various national doctrines have been used to “conceptually envelope” the West.³⁰ Third and finally, these adversaries have at the same time continued to hedge by also investing in more traditional conventional concepts and capabilities, something which is evident in both national readiness³¹ and the growing coordination on arms production and challenging international norms which have become evident since Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³² Seen together, these represent an existential threat to America and its allies, including Canada, beyond anything that has been experienced since the height of the Soviet Union’s power, and which goes far beyond the legacy conception of the battlefield which continues to dominate CA thinking.

Juxtaposed against each other in this way, the degree to which Western forces, and specifically the CA for the purposes of this paper, can be seen to have been carrying on in an orthodox manner while adversaries have undergone profound periods of reflection and change is deeply unsettling. At a time of profound change in the operating environment, the need to address this gap and associated elements has become increasingly urgent, with the alternative to bold action being to accept a drifting CA of declining relevance to Canadian national security interests relative to those other components of military power which will require substantial investment if the CAF is to actualize the aspirations envisioned in PFEC. It is to this challenge and what key considerations such a re-envisioning might be based on which will be the focus of the next section of this paper.

²⁷ Andrew Krepinevich Jr, “The New Nuclear Age: How China’s Growing Nuclear Arsenal Threatens Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2022): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-04-19/new-nuclear-age>.

²⁸ Jacob Shapiro and Liam Collins, “Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts,” *War on the Rocks (Online)*, April 8, 2024: <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/great-power-competition-will-drive-irregular-conflicts/>

²⁹ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare: China’s Plan to Destroy America* (Panama City: Panama City Publishing Company, 2002).

³⁰ Killcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, 175.

³¹ Mike Studeman, “China is Battening Down for the Gathering Storm of Taiwan,” *War on the Rocks (Online)*, April 17, 2024: <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/china-is-battening-down-for-the-gathering-storm-over-taiwan/>

³² Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, “The Axis of Upheaval: How America’s Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2024): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>

A 21st CENTURY MAGINOT LINE? SEEING THE WIDER PICTURE

Since the Second World War the infamous example of the French Maginot Line has become synonymous with the observation that armies tend to prepare for the last war and that that aggressors will seek to avoid strength and instead exploit weakness, thereby all but guaranteeing a continuation of former US Defense Secretary Gates' observation that the next conflict is all but certain to be of a character different from the one which most defence planners are currently preparing for.³³ Recognizing this, few would knowingly accept the risk of betting on a narrow conception of war reminiscent of the last large-scale global conflict at the expense of applying a wider lens to considering what actual allied and national readiness will need to look like in order to confront both the most likely and dangerous scenarios of the years ahead. It is what this broader conception might best be seen to include which will now be considered alongside how this alternate narrative challenges current concepts of LSCO and, in doing so, raises the possibility that this may well be the Maginot Line of the new Cold War.

Adversaries Will Seek to Win Without Fighting

As has been hinted at earlier in this paper, one of the risks of undue focus on recent conflicts such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine is the sort of “presentism” described by Paddy Walker and Peter Roberts in their recently published primer on conflicts evolving forms and norms,³⁴ and one which risks mistaking certain conflicts as indicative of future war rather than as potential edge cases themselves. As has also already been hinted at, this line of reasoning often finds a welcome reception among Western military audiences with a predisposition for evidence that future contests will be decided by the sort of combined arms warfare perfected during the last century and for which most training remains optimized. Added to this, and as Frank Hoffman has observed, the US military (and, by default, those falling under its intellectual influence) lack the taxonomy and concepts to both understand and adapt to alternative modes of war and warfare,³⁵ in turn suggesting that forces such as the CA are unlikely to have yet assimilated an organization wide understanding of the wider nature of the contest which they are part of.

Despite such current challenges in appreciating broader conceptions of competition and conflict, the ideas themselves are both undeniable and ancient, and were in fact a decisive feature of the US's triumph over the Soviet Union in the last Cold War.³⁶ What has changed however, particularly over the course of the ongoing fourth Industrial Revolution which has already disrupted numerous industries,³⁷ is the means

³³ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, *Adaption Under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): I.

³⁴ Paddy Walker and Peter Roberts, *War's Changed Landscape? A Primer on Conflict's Forms and Norms* (London: Howgate Publishing Limited, 2024), Intro., Libby.

³⁵ Frank Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (November 2018): 31.

³⁶ Vickers, *By All Means Available*, Ch. 23, Libby.

H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (Harper Collins, 2020), intro., Libby.

³⁷ Mick Ryan, *War Transformed: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Great Power Competition and Conflict* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2022): 20.

available to actors seeking to degrade and ultimately defeat their opponents without needing to resort to the tools of conventional armed conflict. Unlike previous eras during which activities such as political and economic warfare were limited by available communication technology, the advent of mass internet connectivity and smartphones has broadened the scope of warfare to a degree previously unimaginable.³⁸ In this way adversaries have dedicated substantial resources to exploiting the openness of Western societies for both direct advantage as well as to erode their cohesion and competitiveness, and with the ultimate goal of eclipsing the post-Second World War order and replacing it with one more to their liking.³⁹ Perhaps most infamous are examples such as Chinese economic espionage against American corporations, including defence contractors, and Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election, each of which achieved strategic effects from which the West's ability to recover over the long-term is not yet known.⁴⁰ Similar activities have also been conducted against Canada, with recent remarks by the Director of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) underscoring this fact even if it remains uncertain whether national leadership have fully understood the associated message.⁴¹

Having already experienced such astounding success in these regards, there is little reason to expect adversary actors to back away from this preferred approach in favor directly contesting Western conventional military preponderance. While this is not to say that conventional combat between great powers is no longer possible, it does suggest that militaries, including conventional ground forces, may be failing to maximize their potential utility if they are not to adapt their roles to ones which support both national cohesion and resilience, as well as better respond to the demands of below threshold competition. For the CA, as a force traditionally focused on force generation, acknowledgement of this reality demands a significant rethinking of the force's capstone doctrine and operating concept in order for it to become relevant to persistent information age competition, a challenge which has similarly been noted with reference to the much larger US Army.⁴²

Most Wars That Do Occur Will Remain Small Ones

The second broad observation to be offered here, and one which naturally follows the original Cold War experience, is that in those instances in which conflict does cross the threshold into violence, it remains unlikely that this will be on such a scale as to see ground forces such as the CA engaged in large scale combat against a state adversary. Since the 1950s the overwhelming logic of nuclear deterrence as largely precluded such a

³⁸ Walker and Roberts, *War's Changed Landscape?* Ch.2, Libby.

³⁹ Elizabeth Economy, "China's Alternative Order And What America Should Learn from It," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2024): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-alternative-order-xi-jinping-elizabeth-economy>

⁴⁰ Vickers, *By All Means Available*, Ch. 23, Libby.

⁴¹ Robert Fife and Steven Chase, "CSIS Director Says China's Concerted Effort to Steal Canadian Technology is 'Mind-Boggling'," *The Globe and Mail*, April 29, 2024.

⁴² George Fust, "The Army Has A Competition Problem," *Modern War Institute at West Point* (Online), January 22, 2024: <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-army-has-a-competition-problem/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIf%20the%20Joint%20Force%20does,to%20fully%20identify%20the%20solution.>

scenario, and while the height of the nuclear standoff between the US and Soviet Union is now decades past and rapidly fading in the popular memory, the associated fundamentals are likely to remain a determinant factor. And while the exact nature of a new nuclear age remains an ongoing topic of both professional and academic debate, this generally supports the assessment that irregular and proxy warfare are likely to remain the predominant forms of armed conflict.⁴³

Rather than a harbinger of the return of great power conflict, this is perhaps the central lesson to be taken from the current Ukraine experience thus far. Despite various calls for direct intervention by NATO forces, either in the form of a no-fly zone as called for by Ukrainian President Zelensky⁴⁴ or French President Macron's more recent comments on the potential commitment of ground forces,⁴⁵ Russia's nuclear deterrent has ensured that neither option looks to have yet been seriously entertained by NATO leadership. As such, conventional Alliance forces have largely been constrained to the periphery of the conflict, which for ground forces has primarily meant deterrence, partner force capacity building, and other enabling activities conducted outside the actual conflict zone.⁴⁶

Though the specifics are sure to vary by region and country, this logic holds equally true when applied to other theatres of competition and potential conflict such as the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, Africa and Latin America. This suggests that the demand for forces relevant to proxy and irregular conflict will remain high, and likely beyond the capacity of those special operations forces which, although having become the force of choice for such roles, also face their own substantial challenges in adapting to the current threat environment.⁴⁷ This naturally leads to questions of whether ongoing demands in the IW space will necessitate the further expansion of such forces to cope with demand, or whether conventional forces might be able to adapt in ways which enable them to apply a coherent approach to IW in support of national strategic objectives.

If and When Big Wars Occur, They Will Remain Whole of Society Contests

Finally, and while for the above noted reasons "big wars" on the scale of the last century's World Wars remain unlikely, should they occur there is little reason to expect

⁴³ Shapiro and Collins, "Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts,"

<https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/great-power-competition-will-drive-irregular-conflicts/>

⁴⁴ Brian Finucane and Olga Oliker, "Zelensky Wants a No-Fly Zone. NATO is Right to Say No," *The New York Times* (Online), March 25, 2022: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/opinion/no-fly-zone-ukraine-nati-russia.html>.

⁴⁵ Murray Brewster, "Macron's Musings About Group Troops Send Ukraine's Allies Running for Cover," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (Online), February 28, 2024: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/macron-ukraine-russia-putin-1.7127500>

⁴⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine*, March 21, 2024: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm#:~:text=Since%20the%20start%20of%20Russia%207s,all%20military%20aid%20to%20Ukraine.

⁴⁷ Watling, "Old Habits Die Hard," <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/old-habits-die-hard-special-operations-forces-twenty-years-of-counterterrorism-and-the-new-era-of-great-power-competition/>.

them to be any less demanding than those which have come before.⁴⁸ Deterring them may therefore require levels of societal readiness and commitment which have been called for by some NATO military leaders⁴⁹ and which can be difficult to imagine for the vast majority of Canadians with neither memory of the Second World War nor the height of the Cold War. Here the future Canadian Brigade in Latvia is a useful case in point, as presumably its mission is predicated on having the necessary combat power needed to participate in a NATO conflict with Russia in defence of the Baltic states. In reality however, none of the replacement personnel, equipment or even ammunition and other supplies exist at present for this to be the case, a remaining gap which at least for the time being necessitates dependency on other follow-on NATO forces and nuclear capability to mitigate.⁵⁰

What this observation brings to the fore is that if forces such as the CA are serious about their foundational roles of deterring, and if necessary defeating, state adversaries, there remains a gaping delta in what needs to be done to achieve anything like what has been discussed in the aforementioned British context.⁵¹ In the case of the Canadian example, the Army faces the multi-part challenge of needing to recapitalize industrial age requirements needed for baseline combined arms warfighting, while also modernizing for the information age and making the cognitive transition to the potential demands of a large-scale conflict which is nearly impossible to predict with any accuracy. After literally decades of not needing to confront the realities of such an existential challenge, the associated paradigm shift is indeed a large one.

WHERE TO FROM HERE: CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Having first sought to identify the tensions between current CA organizational behavior and the challenge posed by threat actor adaptation at a time of profound technological and geopolitical change, then more broadly considering what wider lessons might be drawn in support of future option analysis, the final portion of this paper will be used to consider what specific changes the CA might be considering making as a result. None of which follows would necessarily be easy or even viable in light of current resource pressures and other constraints, yet are offered as a broadening exercise and with an eye to further thought and discussion.

⁴⁸ Brian Kerg, “There will be no ‘short, sharp’ war. A fight between the US and China would likely go on for years,” *Atlantic Council (Online)*, March 19, 2024: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/there-will-be-no-short-sharp-war-a-fight-between-the-us-and-china-would-likely-go-on-for-years/>

⁴⁹ Julian Brazier, “CGS is Right: The UK Must Urgently Rebuild its Capacity to Expand,” *RUSI Commentary (Online)*, February 2021, 2024: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/cgs-right-uk-must-urgently-rebuild-its-capacity-expand>

⁵⁰ Mark Cancian, Sean Monaghan and Daniel Fata, “Strengthening Baltic Security: Next Steps for NATO,” *Centre for Strategic and International Studies (Online)*, June 27, 2023: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strengthening-baltic-security-next-steps-nato>

⁵¹ Ed Arnold, “NATO Societies Must be Ready for War,” *RUSI Commentary (Online)*, January 26, 2024: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nato-societies-must-be-ready-war>

Shift Balance in Favor of Adaptability Over Enforcement of Rigid Standards

In a recent article published on the British website the *Wavell Room*, the author describes a hypothetical scenario in which a British Brigade is destroyed by a near peer adversary.⁵² In essence, the tale is of a force which had observed the experiences of Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine, but failed to truly learn and assimilate the associated lessons learned, as well as apply this learning to their own specific context. While in this case the story is of a close ally, the narrative might equally be applied to the CA with its current emphasis on individual and collective training standards at the expense of engaging in the necessary study and experimentation need to ensure the force is postured for uncertainty.

And while such uncertainty is inherent in preparing for future conflict, it remains true that a degree of hedging is absolutely necessary while at the same time cultivating the necessarily adaptable leadership, doctrine and technology needed to prevail when faced with wartime conditions.⁵³ In support of these underpinning requirements analysts have already drawn a variety of critical deductions from recent conflicts as well as forecast change. Key associated features include the transparent battlefield, contested electromagnetic spectrum, increased lethality of both direct and long-range indirect fires, contested logistics and an increasingly urban battlefield among others.⁵⁴ Add to this the continued integration of both mature and potential features of the fourth industrial revolution, including robotics, artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology,⁵⁵ and it appears evident that we are at a point in time with respect to the information age which closely parallels the period between the First and Second World Wars when individuals such as J.F.C. Fuller were envisioning that next generation of combined arms warfare.⁵⁶

Seeking to answer these fundamental questions concerning the character of future combat on land is undoubtedly the most pressing task facing today's armies, regardless of how difficult a process this is likely to be. What is certain however is that any thoughts of characterizing this challenge as simply a return to the type of warfare that had been planned for in the context of the conventional threat posed by the Soviet Union in Europe is unacceptable. Instead, new concepts for battlefield geometry and such systems as those for manoeuvre, fires and support will be needed, aspects which have been examined in Jack Watling's recently published *The Arms of the Future*,⁵⁷ along with the associated changes in doctrine, force structure, professional development and infrastructure. This is fortunately also a challenge to which Canada is well equipped to respond as a highly educated, diverse, technologically advanced and predominantly urban society. Nevertheless, true progress in these areas will require that the necessary space be created

⁵² Sergio Miller, "2026: British Army Brigade Destroyed in Suravia," *The Wavell Room (Online)*, April 9, 2024: <https://wavellroom.com/2024/04/09/2026-british-army-brigade-destroyed-in-suravia/#:~:text=It%20is%202026.,a%20national%20disaster%20and%20humiliation>.

⁵³ Barno and Bensahel, *Adaption Under Fire*, 272-284.

⁵⁴ Jack Watling, *The Arms of the Future: Technology and Close Combat in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024): Part 1.

⁵⁵ Ryan, *War Transformed*, 20-21.

⁵⁶ J.F.C. Fuller, *On Future Warfare* (London: Sifton Praed and Co, Ltd, 1928).

⁵⁷ Watling, *The Arms of the Future*, Part 2.

to prioritize a culture of learning and experimentation while at the same time maintaining a rationalized set of core competencies and avoiding the potential pitfalls of mistaking “innovation theatre” for actual organizational transformation.⁵⁸

Develop and Promote a Coherent Irregular Warfare Framework

Secondly, and while not abandoning the adaptive and learning mindset required to transform as a credible warfighting force, the CA must reconceive of itself as an Army that can also compete below the threshold of armed conflict, including as an instrument of IW. As has been observed elsewhere, this is hardly a unique challenge to the CA, yet nevertheless is one which will require the commitment of resources to develop the required doctrine and concepts, as well as communicate the value of such activities to a force which as been brought up to see them has inferior expressions of land power rather than what needs to be a coherent set of activities conducted in pursuit of strategic interests as part of persistent competition.

Again, the timing for such a shift in thinking may in fact be prescient, with the Army struggling to retain personnel drawn by the allure of special operations forces and other specialized capabilities at the same time as there are signs that these forces are themselves stretched by the needs to maintain current operations while also adapting to GPC.⁵⁹ Provided that this trend is to continue, this indicates that the CA can expect increasing demand to fulfill at least some of the sort of tasks which have recently gone to SOF and in addition to the array of strategically valuable non-warfighting roles which Canada has asked of its Army for much of the last century. Unified as part of a coherent IW concept and doctrine, and validated against defined national strategic objectives, the Army has much to offer in this space and with the potential to help lead in reframing operations in such regions as Africa, the Middle East and Latin America and the Caribbean as deliberate competitive efforts “joined up” under a unified narrative rather than the fragmented pursuits which they appear to be now.

The recent introduction of the Global Response Task Force (GRTF)⁶⁰ by the CA can be seen as potentially a small but positive step in this direction, and one that should be re-enforced with supporting IW concepts and doctrine in order to assist in maturing these TFs into agile and responsive forces. If successful, this and other IW efforts could conceivably then be expanded to include the ability to generate additional and potentially more complex task tailored organizations drawing on a variety of Army capabilities, both current as well as others which may yet be created to tap into national competitive advantages to help service this demand.

⁵⁸ Joseph Buccino, “Fool’s Gold: Overhyped Tech Startups Distract from Military Innovation,” *The US Army College (War Room)*, April 5, 2024: <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/fools-gold>.

⁵⁹ Watling, “Old Habits Die Hard,” <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/old-habits-die-hard-special-operations-forces-twenty-years-of-counterterrorism-and-the-new-era-of-great-power-competition/>.

⁶⁰ Department of National Defence, *Ex VIGILANT RAM Tests 1 CMBG’s Battle Space Adaptability*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/news/regional-news/western-sentinel/2024/02/ex-vigilant-ram-2024.html>

Restore the Centrality of the Army Reserve

In the earlier referenced *Lament for an Army*, in which English mourns the decline of the CA following the Korean War and culminating in the Somalia Crisis of the 1990s, he concludes with promoting the idea of a “Hegelian Army,” one led by a newly professionalized officer corps and recognizing the centrality of the militia (Army Reserve or ARes) as the CA’s principle link to the wider society and ultimate source of strength in the event of large-scale war.⁶¹ Such a shift, something English recognizes would demand that a much larger portion of the Army’s budget be assigned to the ARes and would require that the Regular Force’s primary role be its previous and inevitable wartime role of training the Reserve,⁶² is likely to be seen as something of a radical idea for those who have become accustomed to the ARes primarily functioning as a domestic response force and to augment, sustain and support the Regular Force.⁶³ It is also one that would demand at least some adaptation for the modern age and evolution of the threat landscape in ways which would have been understandably hard to imagine in the late-1990s. Nevertheless, it also quite rightly points out that if the CA’s aspirations with respect to LSCO are to be credible, they will need to be based on the mobilization capacity manifested in the ARes and aligned with increased attention to societal readiness and resilience which has already drawn increased attention amongst NATO allies.⁶⁴

Brought forward into the present, acknowledgment of these facts demands that the CA recognize the ARes as undoubtedly its most valuable asset, both in interfacing and communicating with the wider community it depends on and as a source of capacity and expertise in time of war. As such the time is ripe for a reimagining of the role of the ARes in ways which go beyond such efforts as the recent Strengthening the Army Reserve (StAR) program which was conceived primarily to stem the ARes’ decline in trained members.⁶⁵ In its place a reinvestment in Reserve Units capable of generating combat power from among the Canadian populace, as well as new units which capitalize on pockets of cultural and technological expertise to meet the needs of the pan-domain battlespace, is required if the CA is to uphold its responsibilities as well as reinvent itself as a useful instrument of national power in the context of the new Cold War.

CONCLUSION

While the continued relevance of Canada’s Army has not yet been widely called into question, and may well never be, recent trends in the global security environment are cause for ample concern that the force produced by the experiences of the post-Second World War period may be increasingly unfit for purpose in the 21st Century. Coming at a time of significant change across both society and the business and public sectors, and

⁶¹ English, *Lament for an Army*, 69-70.

⁶² English, *Lament for an Army*, 69.

⁶³ Government of Canada, *Canadian Army Reserve*, March 11, 2022: <https://www.canada.ca/en/army/corporate/reserve.html>

⁶⁴ Arnold, “NATO Societies Must be Ready for War, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nato-societies-must-be-ready-war>

⁶⁵ C.P. Champion, “Rebuilding the Reserve Force,” *Canadian Global Affairs Institute Policy Perspective*, September, 2022: 6.

with the newly released DPU and PFEC opening the door on a broad reappraisal of Canada's defence posture for the new Cold War ahead, this must be a clarion call for leadership across the Army to challenge dogmatic beliefs and where necessary take bold action in forging a new course. Seizing this opportunity, specifically through prioritizing adaptability and innovation, embracing IW and other aspect of below threshold competition, and returning the ARes to its foundational importance, offers a fleeting window of opportunity to forge a new organizational vision which leverages both the Nation's and the Army's inherent strengths in service of strategic national interests across the spectrum of pan-domain competition and potential conflict. Contemporary examples such as the United States Marine Corps' ongoing transformation instigated by former Commandant General David Berger demonstrates that such bold change may indeed be possible,⁶⁶ though whether the CA has the wherewithal to reinvent itself as a modern, agile and scalable force before it is too late remains to be seen.

⁶⁶ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "A Striking New Vision for the Marines, and a Wakeup Call for the Other Services," *War on the Rocks* (Online), October 1, 2019: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/a-striking-new-vision-for-the-marines-and-a-wakeup-call-for-the-other-services/>

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