

CANADIAN DEFENCE POLICY: OPEN SEASON?

Commitments and Resources

In the course of 1989 it became clear that, however difficult and unpleasant the task, another comprehensive review and basic rethinking of Canadian defence policy is now inescapable. One critical reason is that the spring Budget so dramatically reduced and postponed the spending commitments for re-equipping the Canadian forces that the framework of the 1987 Defence White Paper no longer held any prospect of reconciling Canadian defence capabilities and commitments. There is a widespread expectation that the defence allocation, which was not actually reduced in the 1989 budget, could be singled out again (with official development assistance) in 1990 when the few "discretionary" categories of federal spending will once more be vulnerable to Draconian spending cuts. The second, and even more important, reason for a re-thinking is found in the dramatic evolution of East-West relations and the prospects for equally dramatic change in Canadian military "threat perceptions" and responsibilities.

So far, the global political changes underway do not appear to have reached the point of materially altering military planners' calculations of capabilities and potential threats. However, with the Conventional Forces negotiations proceeding rapidly in Vienna, with substantial reductions in tanks and other equipment expected to be agreed by summer 1990, it would be totally unrealistic for any government in the position of Canada's, to proceed with a major acquisition such as the promised new battle tanks for the Canadian Forces in Germany. Canadian participation, through our NATO contingent has taken on heightened political importance by helping buffer European-US relations during the all-important process of East-West negotiations and the reductions that will follow. However, there is no question that the outcome of those negotiations will soon have a major impact on the overall importance of a Canadian contingent and/or on its designated roles. Either way, Canadian foreign and military policy, while impelled to maintain a steady course during this negotiating phase, must explore a range of highly unpredictable future options, in a field where decisions have long lead-times and very high price tags.