CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES IN A HYPERPOWER ERA

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Danford W. Middlemiss and Denis Stairs make an impressive case for why Canadians should be concerned about the process of interoperability between Canadian and American armed forces. They argue, and persuasively, that interoperability has all the characteristics of "a heavy train rolling downgrade without brakes"—in other words, an unstoppable process that has considerable implications for Canadian autonomy. I do not disagree with them on the unstoppable nature of the process, though I will argue in this paper that the process of interoperability in the defence relationship between Canada and the United States is a logical and inevitable outgrowth of a process which Canadians themselves created. But if interoperability is inevitable and thus unstoppable, is it also as negative a development for Canada as the image of a runaway train suggests? Might it not be possible that interoperability is actually more akin to a roller coaster: utterly unstoppable once underway, but involving a ride that does not inexorably end in disaster? I will argue that interoperability is in fact the ideal defence policy for Canada in the contemporary era—an era marked by the emergence of the United States as a hyperpower in world affairs.

Any discussion of the value of interoperability should begin by noting that Canadian defence policy has very much been a function of the political preferences of ordinary Canadians—preferences that have been reflected exceedingly well by their governors. As Middlemiss and Stairs repeatedly remind us, Canadians do not want to spend serious money on defence. On the contrary, they have demonstrated a studied indifference towards the Canadian Forces. They appear not to care how large or small the CF is—whether it has 120,000 personnel or 50,000. They appear unconcerned by the McJob-like salaries paid to the lower ranks, by the cruddy quarters in which military families are constrained to live, or by the increasing family stresses of more frequent rotations abroad necessitated by downsizing. Canadians may tut-tut when a CF helicopter long past its use-by date falls out of the sky at the same time that ministers of the Crown are buying themselves new Challenger jets, but there is little bite to their head-shaking.

And the indifference of ordinary Canadians has been well represented by their governors. For more than a generation, military expenditures have been driven progressively downwards by every government in Ottawa. Moreover, this has been a truly bipartisan effort. Even a Prime Minister like Brian Mulroney, whose Progressive Conservative government was generally more sympathetic to the cause of defence than the Liberal governments of either Pierre Elliott Trudeau or Jean Chrétien, was not in the end willing to transform that sympathy into hard cash and a more robust military. On the contrary, Mulroney presided over a continuation of the slide, and indeed it was Mulroney who managed to do what not even a Euroskeptic like Trudeau was

capable of doing—i.e., bring the long entrenched practice of stationing Canadian troops in Europe to an end.

But Mulroney, like Trudeau before him and Chrétien after him, was simply in a very deep groove. Beginning in the late 1960s, trying to do defence on the cheap became progressively more deeply ingrained in Canadian practice. Over this period, the size of the Canadian Forces has been halved, and the capital budget has been stretched thin as the complexity of latest-generation equipment—and its cost—has dramatically increased. As well, rust-out has become the norm, as trying to extend equipment well beyond their use-by date has been the hallmark of those who make Canadian defence policy.

Thus, it is true, as Middlemiss and Stairs suggest, that the rise of interoperability as the doctrine of choice is deeply linked to the unwillingness of Canadians to spend serious money on defence. But I would argue that there are also several other factors at work.

First, interoperability is a logical outgrowth of the habits developed over four and a half decades of Cold War by the Canadian military establishment itself. Given the degree of integration between military forces in the multilateral context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in the bilateral context of the North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) command, it should come as no surprise that the Canadian military would after 50 years be deeply socialized by that experience, and look for ways to be as tightly integrated into the American military as possible as a means of sustaining its own professionalism—to fight "alongside the best", to use the phrase enshrined in Canada's 1994 White Paper on defence.

Second, the only way to fight alongside the best given Canadian spending on defence was to develop a deep and symbiotic relationship with the armed forces of the United States. For the clear consequences of smaller forces that are more thinly equipped is that the CF simply has a difficult time mounting sustained military operations independently of others. It is only with difficulty that Canadians are able to get to the field independently—as the case of East Timor in 1999 demonstrates—and once there Canadian forces are so thinly stretched that they cannot be sustained in the field for long periods—as the case of the deployment of the Canadian contingent to Kandahar in 2002 shows.

Third, interoperability has been a logical response for a government and a military establishment that has long been in denial about the strategic implications of a shrinking military budget. While ministers have been unwilling to spend on defence, they have also been unwilling to make strategic decisions about the implications of a defence budget for the size, shape and nature of the Canadian military. And for its part, the Canadian military establishment has spent the last 35 years trying to avoid the painful decisions that downsizing demands of any organization.

Instead, both ministers and the general staff have resorted to the politics of pretence: ministers pretend that their allocations for defence are more than "enough" for the Canadian Forces to undertake the tasks assigned to them by Cabinet; and the military brass pretends that the CF can deliver what a multi-purpose combat-capable force is supposed to be able to deliver. The reality, of course, is that Canadian forces have been downsized to the point where they are still capable of performing a range of military tasks, but in such little bits and pieces that these capabilities are virtually meaningless unless they are an add-on to the operations of others.

And, thus, in this elaborate game of make-believe, interoperability provides the perfect cover for all the players. The process of integration with American forces allows both ministers and mandarins to continue to avoid making strategic choices. Because interoperability affords the various parts of the Canadian military an opportunity to contribute in an effective and

instrumental way to US-led military operations, the military brass can avoid making the crucial decision about whether the CF should do a few things well—which would require them to abandon a huge range of military tasks—rather than a lot of things poorly (which would surely be Canada's lot if it did not have an ally like the United States willing to allow foreigners the privilege of integration with their forces). Thus, interoperability makes for bureaucratic peace within National Defence Headquarters, since it avoids the internecine warfare between the various services that would surely accompany serious strategic decision-making.

Interoperability also makes for political peace between ministers and mandarins. It has allowed a succession of cohorts of general officers to avoid having to have a serious showdown with ministers that would surely be required if the realities of Canadian defence capabilities were left fully exposed. While over the years there have been the occasional dissident members of the general staff willing to resign in protest and on principle, the political impact of such resignations has been largely mitigated by low numbers.

On the contrary, following a pattern evident in virtually every large organization, a succession of general officers has cycled through the upper reaches of the DND bureaucracy on their way to honourable retirement. They might have grumbled *sotto voce* about the stinginess of their political masters, but very few sought to create any serious political waves, many of them turning into vociferous critics only after the safe haven of retirement had been reached. (And lest it be thought this an overly harsh judgement, consider what political waves would surely be created had, for example, the *entire* general staff resigned en masse in protest against the funding decisions of ministers.)

If interoperability offers the military establishment a reason to muddle through in peace rather than confront the implications of low spending, interoperability also allows ministers to avoid having to confront the strategic consequences of the cumulative effects of their funding decisions. Interoperability permits them to maintain the illusion that the CF is indeed a "multi-purpose combat-capable" force, for the integration of Canadian forces into a broader command structure helps to hide the fact that Canadian forces have become progressively more "lite" over the years. If the US military had not been so accommodating, Canadian ministers—like their mandarins—would have been forced long ago to confront the necessity of making some serious strategic decisions.

Importantly, the likelihood that this dynamic will change any time soon is minimal. It is a condition that is, as political scientists like to term it, deeply structural. Simply put, interoperability serves the interests of too many key players in the national defence game, and none of those key players has any incentive to change the game—particularly not given the preferences of ordinary Canadians for their government's pinchpenny diplomacy.[1]

So if interoperability is inevitable for reasons of domestic Canadian politics—and I agree with Middlemiss and Stairs that it is—must we therefore conclude that this strategy has only negative implications for Canadian foreign policy? While critics have raised a number of concerns about interoperability, there is one concern that strikes a deep and emotive chord with Canadians. This is the concern that the more interoperable Canadian forces are, the more closely integrated with the American military machine they become, and that, it is argued, will have a dramatic—and negative—effect on Canadian autonomy.

Middlemiss and Stairs put it succinctly:

> Is it possible that Canada will be left with little choice but to go when—and only when—the Americans go, or not go at all? And is it conceivable that in some cases the second of these two options will be ruled out as well, given the kinds of pressures that may emanate

> from Washington as a result of the expectations of automatic support that will be created there by Canada's eager pursuit of further integration with the American structure?

Writing shortly after the Chrétien government announced the deployment of Canadian forces to Kandahar in January 2002, Thomas Axworthy made essentially the same point. Each little incremental decision on integration, he wrote, "nudges us ever so slightly more firmly into the American orbit".[2] His brother Lloyd, who had been Canada's Foreign Minister from 1996 to 2000, expressed comparable concerns some months later, suggesting that interoperability goes:

> to the heart of some decisions that are made about Canadian international foreign and defence policies both in North America and in a broader scheme. We're at one of those defining moments as a country and the choices that are being made will have a lot of repercussions in the future."[3]

Many critics of interoperability argue that if the Canadian government were to pursue an alternative course, it would be better able to maximize both its autonomy and its effectiveness in world politics. This is an argument that is, of course, pleasing to Canadian ears, and quite consonant with the widespread mythology peddled to Canadians by politicians that during the Cold War era Canada was never in the American orbit, but rather occupied a happy middle ground, seeking to promote global peace and order and good governance through diplomacy and peacekeeping rather than violence and war.

But there are two problems with this argument. First, the argument blithely ignores the reality that Canada has been firmly in the American "orbit" for decades. On any criterion one might select—economic, military, diplomatic, cultural, geographical, environmental—the pace and scale of North American integration over the course of the twentieth century was relentless. (Indeed, ironically, it is only in the political sphere that there has been virtually no integration, reminding us of the enduring wisdom of Naomi Black's observation some 30 years ago that absorptive systems are impossible.)

Second, and more importantly, the argument that Canada needs to be as free from the American "orbit" as possible so that the government in Ottawa can maximize Canadian autonomy on the global stage takes little account of the deep differences in the structure of global politics that have occurred in the last decade. And the most important change, I would argue, is the rise of the United States as a power with superordinate capabilities. In the mid-1990s, Hubert Védrine, the French Foreign Minister, started referring to the United States as *une hyperpuissance*—a hyperpower—to characterize how much more powerful than a *super*power the United States had become since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. While the term tends to be used with a pejorative edge, there is a good case, as I have argued elsewhere,[4] for applying hyperpower in an analytical rather than a purely forensic fashion.

As an analytical concept, hyperpower is useful for its ability to create a separate category for a state with the characteristics of the United States. A hyperpower, it can be argued, is "hyper" in two separate, albeit related, senses. First, it is hyper in the original Greek sense of the prefix—i.e., "over or above", or "superordinate" (as in hypersonic). Thus a hyperpower is one where there is a considerable and indeed an unbridgeable distance in capacity between it and all others in the international system. But a hyperpower is also "hyper" in its secondary and more normative sense of something that is well above the norm, or *excessive* (as in hyperactivity). In other words, a hyperpower uses its superordinate power capacities in a manner well beyond what others do, seeking almost obsessively to define the behaviour of others as conflicts of interest,

and to ensure that in those conflicts of interest with others in the international system, its own interests prevail. A hyperpower therefore is fundamentally unilateral in orientation. It has no difficulty in dividing the world—as George W. Bush did without hesitation or apology after the terrorist attacks of September 11—into those who are either its friends and those who are its enemies. A hyperpower may use multilateral diplomacy, but only on its terms. And a hyperpower will not shrink from exerting its superordinate military power to prevail over others.

The emergence of an era in world politics that will be dominated by a single and unassailable hyperpower poses crucial challenges for a country like Canada, which is already deeply locked into an economic dependency on a north-south axis, and thus has a foreign policy that must be dominated almost exclusively by concerns for the maintenance of good relations with the United States and a border that remains as open as possible for the movement of the $1.9 billion in goods that crosses the border each day. In such an environment, old verities left over from the Cold War era will have diminished relevance for global politics in the hyperpower era. For example, multilateralism, the cardinal organizing principle of Canadian foreign policy for half a century after the Second World War, will have less and less resonance in Washington, and thus less relevance for the protection and advancement of Canadian interests than during the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War era.

In this environment, it can be argued that interoperability makes considerable sense—not only as a cornerstone of defence policy, but also as one of the fundamentals of Canadian foreign policy. For if foreign policy is concerned with securing one's parochial national interests, it can be argued that we will see a decline in the importance of multilateral diplomacy in the next decade as American power grows exponentially. Canadians are already bound tightly to the United States economically; interoperability offers Canadians the opportunity to increase integration in a sphere that has been developing since the 1950s.

I would not argue that being bound more tightly to the United States diplomatically and militarily will guarantee that Canadian governments will be able to advance Canadian national interests. I would argue, however, that in the contemporary configuration of global power, Canadians have a better chance of exercising influence from the inside than by pursuing a diplomatic-military strategy that purposely seeks to distance Canada from active engagement with the hyperpower centre.

Endnotes

1. For an elaboration of this argument, see Kim Richard Nossal, "Pinchpenny Diplomacy: The Decline of 'Good International Citizenship' in Canadian Foreign Policy", *International Journal*, Vol. 54 (Winter 1998-9), pp. 88-105.
2. Thomas Axworthy, "Integration by increment", *Globe and Mail*, 17 January 2002.
3. "Ex-minister raises alarm over military integration: Report says continental defence strategy poses grave risks", *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 27 April 2002.
4. Kim Richard Nossal, "Life with Uncle Revisited: The United States and the Issue of Leadership", in David G. Haglund (ed.), *The France-US Leadership Race: Closely Watched Allies* (Kingston, ON: Queen's Quarterly Press, 2000), pp. 157-79.