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Changes

The May election brought substantial change to Canada, with both a majority Conservative government and the emergence of the New Democratic Party as the Official Opposition. Whether the Liberals can, over the longer term, recover from their historic defeat remains to be seen. For the time being, however, barring a major misstep from either the Conservatives or the NDP, the Liberals, necessarily focused on rebuilding, will be less of a factor in defence policy.

The Conservative majority government promises continuity in National Defence, with Peter MacKay remaining as Minister. The Conservatives must balance their desire to cut the deficit and reduce taxes on the one hand (policies potentially contradictory in themselves) in an economic climate still uncertain, with promises for new fighter aircraft (with disputed cost projections), new ships for the Navy and the Coast Guard, new icebreakers, and the establishment of an air expeditionary wing at Bagotville. If the F-35 should prove more expensive than the Conservatives have anticipated, then some hard choices will follow.

The New Democratic Party now must establish its credentials as a viable alternative to the Conservatives. This will have some disciplining effect on its policies. How some traditional lines of NDP thinking adapt to this will be interesting to observe. Its shadow ministers – Paul Dewar for Foreign Affairs, Jack Harris for Defence, and Christine Moore (a nurse, who also served in the Canadian Forces) as Associate Minister (for military procurement) – will have increased scope to make a mark, though at the same time they will be constrained by the government's majority position. One expects continued pressure to reduce the residual role of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, while stressing a civilian presence, and possibly a revival of pressure on the government on the detainee issue. Establishing a shadow minister focusing specifically on procurement could be an interesting move. The NDP has also promised a

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stable program for shipbuilding, proper staffing, training and equipment for the Canadian Forces, and a White Paper on Defence in twelve months. They will review the F-35 purchase within that White Paper. As expected, however, while stressing the defence of Canada as such, they also emphasize support for peacekeeping and related efforts abroad. Our defence relationship with the United States will undoubtedly be another area of interest for them.

Under the Martin and Harper governments, a kind of consensus surrounded defence policy. The Liberals and Conservatives, knowing that the Canadian Forces were too weak to meet national needs, with rust-out imminent, agreed to expand its strength, and undertake major programmes of re-equipment. The NDP tolerated this view. Though this consensus eroded over the issue of whether to procure F 35s, the Liberals and NDP refrained from rejecting the idea in principle, claiming merely that they would reconsider it.

That consensus, essential to national security for the past decade, is confronting a natural end, a political one. The Conservatives can run defence policy as they like for five years, perhaps ten. Probably they will continue to favour the CF, as part of a strategy of reviving traditional Anglo-Canadian patriotism, with its military links, and using it to redefine national identity. From their perspective, better that other parties oppose them on defence policy than support them. More interesting, and uncertain, are attitudes on the left. Throughout the cold war, the NDP treated defence and foreign policies as bones it could throw to its left wing. As a result, these policies became so anti-American as to be almost pro-Soviet. Jack Layton thought this approach irresponsible and foolish, and turned toward the mainstream. The new political environment of 2011 presents a challenge to this approach. In order to replace the Liberals on the centre-left, Layton must keep his policies, as a whole, anchored there. On issues of foreign and defence policy, this probably means support for a muscular Pearsonian policy, linked to greater criticism of American actions. Yet his Quebecois wing is unlikely to enjoy further foreign entanglements or military procurement (except for equipment built in Quebec, where the looming warship contracts will have great consequences). Over the next year, Layton's decisions on defence and foreign policy will be a powerful indicator of his strategic calculations, as he strives to balance political imperatives in Quebec and the rest of Canada, and perhaps they will leave the Liberals some room to rebuild a distinct and attractive line of policy. In any case, for strategic and rhetorical reasons, defence policy probably will become a centre of partisan division, rather than consensus. This need not be a bad thing.

The international environment is also changing. Our commitment in Afghanistan is reducing and changing its shape, but the government intends to keep some personnel in a training role for a while. Presumably civilian efforts there will also continue. The winding-down of the Afghanistan mission, or at least its reduction to a lower level, presents an opportunity to rebuild the land component of the Canadian Forces in particular, and to identify and absorb the lessons, both combat and non-combat, of a difficult and complex undertaking. Our current involvement in enforcing a somewhat elastic UN resolution in Libya presents a new commitment, but not large-scale or one that, it should be hoped, would go on for any great time. Unless, then, we are to return to UN peacekeeping and related efforts in a major way – which does not seem likely in this government even if the need may objectively be there – we might expect a re-orientation of our defence thinking to a somewhat more national basis. This will, budget permitting, allow the re-equipping of the Canadian Forces, including the air and maritime components, and a new possible emphasis on the North.

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