

Editorial

Action this Day?

In a world very much tuned to instant gratification, the spectre of a long war in Ukraine raises the prospect of Ukraine's supporters losing patience. Authoritarian regimes in China and Russia stress that the inconsistency, fluctuation and internal debates characteristic of democracies make them weaker than authoritarian competitors. They argue that authoritarians 'get things done' while democracies facilitate, debate, fluctuate and procrastinate. They take the very strengths of legislative opposition, media freedom and public debates about strategy that define the democratic world as debilitating signs of weakness. This authoritarian analysis is self-serving for governments whose main purpose, superseding all else, is the survival of their own regimes, however corrupt, however disinterested in the views or quality of life at the street level of their respective populations.

This illustrates a fundamental lack of understanding of the strengths of democracy, and an under-estimation of the support that the West has extended to Ukraine. Every time a joint naval task force from NATO partners like the United States, the UK, France or Canada enters waters adjacent to the battle theatre where Russian aggression is continuously resisted by Ukrainian regular and irregular forces, it is about Western democracies making it clear that Ukraine's democracy is not alone. Every time the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) deploys *Kingston*-class anti-mining and coastal patrol vessels to the region, to join other Canadian warships already in theatre, it makes it clear that Canada, and its women and men in uniform, is engaged. It is also a clear message to the Kremlin that Russian naval – or other designs – on NATO countries bordering the Russian Federation will elicit a joint force response by NATO countries writ large.

Minister of National Defence Anita Anand deserves recognition for the acuity and determination she has shown, as a new Minister of Defence, in facilitating Canadian supply and resupply to Ukrainian land forces and civilian authorities with defensive, medical, lethal and tactical supplies along with substantial fiscal support. It is not her fault that the supply base available within the stores, equipment and artillery reserves of the Canadian Armed Forces are not as deep as she might have wished. Her predecessors in both main political parties are responsible for that gap.

And, despite the faux analysis by Beijing and Moscow about democracies, Canada's partisan political divide has shown remarkable balance and coherence on the issue of arming and aiding Ukrainian forces. Parties often associated with anti-military or pacifist political views in the past have been constructive in their comments, supportive in their legislative deliberations and, while asking important questions and offering suggestions, very much on side with a democratic and sovereign Ukraine.

This recent violent and brutal breakout by Russia from the non-aggression framework that has defined the post-Berlin Wall world needs to be a wake-up call for all Western democracies and their military procurement plans. And it appears that the wake-up call has worked. The recent Madrid NATO doctrine update which calls for a massive ramping up of the rapid response force and the size and scope of NATO forces deployed in Eastern European potential land, sea and air battle zones illustrates the opposite of complacency.

Has the wake-up happened in Canada? Canada does not now have the military complement in any of its three services, and Special Forces, to do its share in this enhanced



HMCS *Montreal* fires its 57mm gun at a Hammerhead target drone simulating fast inshore attack craft during *Operation Reassurance* in the Mediterranean Sea on 11 May 2022.

Credit: Corporal Braden Trudeau Canadian Armed Forces



Credit: Pte Connor Bennett,
Canadian Armed Forces

Norwegian, German, Dutch, American, Danish, British, Portugese, French, and Canadian warships sail in formation during Exercise Dynamic Mongoose 2022 on 19 June 2022 in northern European waters. HMCS *Halifax* leads the column on the right.

guarantee of stability. Long-term plans for gradual ramp-ups over many years will only re-assure the Russians that Canada is happy with the ‘big hat, no cattle’ epithet about Canadian military capacity.

In the Second World War, when Winston Churchill had to rebuild an armed force that, except for the Royal Navy, had been deeply diminished by years of under-investment, he did not rely on the usual procurement and military construction stream. He brought in experienced private sector leaders, untied to existing slow shipbuilding or aircraft construction interests, and gave them the ‘action this day’ mandate.¹ The bureaucratic powers-that-were back then hated the idea. Churchill did not care. The fighter aircraft ramp-up was extraordinary, as was the ramp-up in Canada and other Allies in building and dispatching the tools of defence.

The message of the present challenge in Ukraine could not be more clear. Even if it is restrained in its aggression in Ukraine, the present Russian regime will look elsewhere for its next assault. The only way that next aggressive lurch can be diverted or diluted is through armed deterrence that reduces strategic or tactical options upon a would-be aggressor in any theatre.

If Canada is to be part of the collective deterrence and constraint on Russian aggression, it simply needs more tools to do the job. This means a larger and more versatile navy, with unmanned deployable capacity, more women and men in uniform in all four services, and enhanced Special Forces’ deployment range. It may be comforting for folks in present military and bureaucratic ranks to assure politicians that they are doing all they can with available funds. It is as if the present diminished defence budget is fixed in stone and all other variables must bend to that cornerstone of inadequacy. But this is less than acceptable.

As we discovered during the height of the pandemic and in the initial rush to supply Ukraine, budget numbers are there to serve the public interest, not the other way around. There is very little possibility that Canada’s public interest in the next two decades will not require more robust defence and military capacity. We can already see risks

of continued Russian aggression and armed adventure to the East and North of Canada, on and under the seas, on land and in the air. As well, there are more robust if uncertain Chinese territorial ambitions to the West, not to mention ongoing domestic requirements for military aid to the civil power in the face of natural disasters at home and abroad. This means that the pace of operations for the RCN and other services will not slow. That increased operational rhythm is unsustainable with our present mix of complement and operational platforms. This is why it is time for ‘action this day’ – a massive and focused rebuild and expansion of the Canadian Armed Forces.

In any of the areas of potential kinetic engagement with an aggressor, Canadians of all stripes and dispositions would prefer a diplomatic and non-violent sort out of issues if possible. However that is not always possible. The role of a strong armed force and a broadly deployable, battle-capable and muscular naval presence world-wide is to signal to a potential aggressor the futility of military adventurism. NATO’s great success from its creation in 1949 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was its capacity to send that signal from deployments and ballistic capacity on the land, sea and air. The new Russian aggressive desire to ‘build back the Empire’ requires upping Canada’s capacity.

The supply and materiel alliance between NATO countries, including Canada, and Ukraine must not be time limited. Furthermore, we cannot assume for a moment that left unrestrained the Russian leadership would not try other ‘Empire recapture’ missions in neighbouring former members of the Soviet Union and/or the Warsaw Pact, whatever happens in Ukraine.

The authoritarians are convinced that democracies cannot stay the course. This means that Moscow and Beijing may make bad decisions as a result. The most constructive measure we can pursue in the interest of peace is efficiently and convincingly – and aggressively, if necessary – proving them wrong. ⚓

Hugh Segal

Notes

1. Canadian Lord Beaverbrook took over fighter aircraft manufacturing.