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Canada's Long-Term Strategic Situation

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Research Report

In March 1962, Dr. R.J. Sutherland, a little-known defence scientist and policy advisor from the Defence Research Board (DRB), gave a closed-door talk at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA). Sutherland had been recruited by CIIA President John Holmes to provide members with “an appreciation of how important Canada may be from a military point of view in the nuclear age,” - a limited, if important topic in the rapidly-changing conditions of the early 1960s.¹ The speaker found the question a bit limiting, but promised not to “fight the problem,” even if he might “interpret the topic a little.”² Over the next hour, Sutherland went much further than a little interpretation and drew on his decades of study in history, technology, politics, and economics to imagine some possible scenarios for Canada’s world position in the year 2000. Cutting against the increasingly anti-American and anti-nuclear views held by much of the Canadian public and policy elite, he took issue with the “fairly general belief that power politics is a nasty business and [that] Canada should stay out of it,” noting that “all nations are creatures of their geography, history, and interests.” These factors limited the viable strategic choices open to Canadians, who could choose to be an effective ally in the Western alliance system, with the ability “to act in our own interests.” or, alternatively, to convince themselves that they could ignore the wider world while becoming, in effect, an American satellite.³

The institute’s president did not mind that Sutherland exceeded his brief. In fact, he was delighted. Holmes immediately asked Sutherland to publish his lecture in the CIIA’s periodical, the *International Journal*, even going as far as to allowing Sutherland to publish then work anonymously. After some hesitation, Sutherland relented, and published a toned-down version of his talk in the Summer 1962 edition. Much to his surprise, the publication marked the start of a public career. The *Globe and Mail* published the article in serial, with summaries appearing in *The Windsor Star*, *Brandon Sun* and *Vancouver Sun*. David McIntosh, the defence writer for the *Canadian Press*, gave him a public persona as a “back-room boy,” with unique insights on Canadian defence policy.⁴ His work was even honoured by humour columnists. John Lindblad, the resident card at the *Windsor* jested that:

*[I]f you're in a glum mood this weekend, give an ear to the opinions of one of Canada's bright young men, R.J. Sutherland, who is reported to hang his hat in one of the guarded back rooms in Ottawa where defence planning goes on For one thing the Ottawa expert thinks we'll avoid war. The big reason is what even all the front-room folk know: global war is now global suicide. Thus we pass along this happiest of happy information so there's no use putting off that job of mowing the lawn!*⁵

This characterization as a lone strategic theorist stuck. Following his death in 1967, most historians covering his work have canonised him as a “Canada’s one-man answer to the RAND Corporation,” or some similar description. Indeed, Sutherland remains one of the most important strategic thinkers in recent Canadian history. Policy-makers and advisors quoted his work years after his death in 1967, and new analyses, and occasional imitations, of “Long-Term” still come up in academic and professional publications.⁶

But while Sutherland might have been influential, he was, by both education and experience, hostile to pure theory and technical jargon. This elegance of language, however, makes “Long-Term” both enduring and hard to replicate. Sutherland’s emphasis on the pragmatic makes it impossible to understand his unifying ideas without understanding Sutherland.

Sutherland, however, has not made this task easy. A natural introvert, Sutherland spoke little of himself to others, and as he died suddenly, he left no memoir.⁷ As his biographer, I feel I know Sutherland better than most, though I still do not know him very well.⁸ Even so, I feel an attempt to encapsulate some of Sutherland's thinking and applying it to present problems of Canadian defence policy is worth the risk, as he dealt with similar questions and challenges that present policy-makers must contend with: a bevy of new military technologies, uncertainty in NATO, the impacts of new global communications technologies, political upheaval in the United States, and simultaneous military crises in Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and Africa.

Like Sutherland, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive, fully cited exploration of all these topics. Instead, I will follow in the original author's schema by outlining a general way of thinking about strategic problems, then applying this perspective to a long view of Canadian strategic conditions. Sutherland set his horizon roughly forty years in the future to the year 2000 in 1962, so I will set mine to roughly the same timeframe at 2065. I will begin with a brief explanation of Sutherland's intellectual pedigree before revisiting his original conception of the "invariants" that shaped Canadian strategic choice: namely, the relationships between geography, technology, and the political economy of Canadian strategic choice.

There are elements of this paper that use similar sections from the original text by design, and direct quotation would be impracticable. I encourage readers to read the original in full. In cases where I quote directly from sources other than the original article, or where I feel the reader may benefit from relevant background reading, I will provide footnotes.

A Reluctant Theorist

For someone described as "the most innovative strategic theorist in the country," Sutherland had little praise for either pure theory or pure theorists.⁹ Sutherland was, above all, pragmatic, once warning a 1967 audience that "part of all strategic discussions consists in rationalizing the inevitable and justifying things done after the event," reserving a special hostility for buzzwords such as "containment," describing such doctrines as "little more than catchwords . . . [that] cannot be given any very precise meaning," and that "It is rather shocking to consider that the major politics of great nations are conceived in such crude terms."¹⁰

Sutherland's scepticism of abstract theory grew out of his education and his experience. The earliest, and most important, of his intellectual influences came from economic historian Harold Innis. After enrolling the Commerce programme at the University of Toronto in 1937, the headed by Innis, Sutherland grew close to the senior scholar by winning four consecutive gold medals for academics. Innis' work on Canadian economic history emphasised the relationships between technological, environmental, and economic factors in shaping Canadian political development, and he was well-known for hands-on research methods, such as paddling down the Peace and Slave Rivers by canoe to gain perspective on the fur trade. By the time Sutherland got to know him, Innis had begun to synthesise his economic and historical work into a broader study of political economy and communications theory - but even then, his thought was bound by a close technical study of

the physical media by which information was recorded and transmitted. Upon graduation in 1941, Sutherland was thus primed to see the play of great human forces, such as technology and war, as the product of countless interactions, not as independent actors which imposed their own internal logics on the world around them. He took this worldview with him into his second great passion - the army.

Sutherland was, in many ways, an unlikely soldier. He was naturally introverted and never showed much interest in sports. Yet he joined Canadian Officers Training Corps (COTC) during his first year at the University of Toronto, where he earned a lieutenant's qualification and served as an instructor after the COTC became mandatory for male university students in June 1940. Following graduation Sutherland applied to join the Canadian Active Service Force (CASF) and head overseas. He was heartbroken when an Army medical examiner deemed him unfit for service when he found a lazy eye. His father, a pharmacist, found an optometrist willing to coach his son on the Army's eye exam. Sutherland, armed with a memorised eye chart, fought his way into the service. He then took on more training to become an armoured officer, joined a tank regiment, the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), and fought his way through Italy and the Netherlands. As an intelligence officer, adjutant, and squadron second-in-command, he ended the war as a captain - and indeed, the only officer to have been with the regiment for every major action they fought. This war experience, which included personally calling in an artillery fire mission after radio communication broke down during a river crossing, having a tank shot out from under him, and taking command of a armoured squadron after his commander's tank was disabled, only reinforced his wariness towards clean, predictive theories of conflict. In his first published work, a 1946 article on the future of armoured divisions in the British *Army Quarterly*, Sutherland warned readers that, "perhaps at no time has the immediate future appeared less predictable. Military prophecy is a hazardous venture at any time, but at present it seems little short of folly."¹¹

Following the end of the war, Sutherland returned to the University of Toronto to complete a PhD in Political Economy, with Innis as his supervisor. His dissertation, *The Economic Consequences of Air Power*, reflected both his practical experience of war and his training under Innis. After an extensive doctrinal, political, and economic analysis on the development of air forces before and during the war, Sutherland concluded that the self-contained airpower doctrines, and especially the "scientific" theories of American theorist Billy Mitchell, had not been useful predators or descriptors on the development of air forces, remarking:

*The prosperity of the art of war cannot be gauged by its more obvious literary manifestations The Romans who are among the ablest practitioners of the art of war known to history never developed any theory of war beyond that contained in the asphorisms [sic] si vis pacem para bellum and vae victis.*¹²

Given his wariness about "literary" definitions of war, Sutherland reserved praise for a single formal theorist – the fellow soldier-scholar Carl von Clausewitz. To the modern reader, quoting Clausewitz in dissertations may seem a quaint ritual, but this was not the case in 1950. Before the revival of Clausewitzian thought in the 1960s and 1970s, most scholars viewed *On War* as a crude argument for unrestrained warfare. Sutherland's praise for him was thus less cliché and more avant-garde. He valued Clausewitz because the great Prussian

offered a bridge between Innis' economic theories and the study of warfare. In particular, Sutherland admired the use of a dialectic to explain the relationship between politics and war, and the description of waging war as a trinity of effort between society, government, and the military. This scepticism of tight, predictive theories is about as far as one could get from being the Canadian embodiment of the confident, predictive doctrines of the RAND Corporation.

But although Sutherland had little time for strategic doctrines that provided clear answers, he thought it vital that strategic thinkers have a theoretical base to determine “those major questions with regard to which there is some genuine choice” and “important areas where there is no choice, however much Canadians might like to believe that there is.”¹³ To determine those areas, Sutherland argued, it is vital to determine the Innisian relationships, what Sutherland called “invariants,” that shaped Canadian strategic choice across “a large measure of historical continuity.”¹⁴ Let us now revisit those questions.

The Uncertain, Historical, Future

The beginning of Putin's war in Europe marked, with depressing finality, the form of world politics that have replaced the Cold War. As the Soviet Union and its allied regimes in Eastern Europe began to collapse in 1989, political scientist Francis Fukuyama published a short article, “The End of History?” in the *National Interest*. These fifteen pages captured the thoughts of so many of his contemporaries that Fukuyama was able to expand it into a well-received book, and even more impressively, sparked the creation of an academic cottage industry based on proving or disproving the merits of his ideas. At first glance, his argument might be little more than the kind of gloating one might expect from an early adherent of the neoconservative movement:

*The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.*¹⁵

Fukuyama was not as naive as some of his critics have since suggested. A dedicated Hegelian, he noted that although the Western model of economic and political liberalization was so powerful that it would overcome opposing *ideologies*, such as Fascism or Communism, in the long run, ideology was no substitute for history itself, which carries its own internal logic. This tension was already evident as Fukuyama's article went to press. Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev hoped that the new freedoms of expression provided by the Soviet *glasnost* would power the *perestroika* reforms that would allow Soviet people to break through the economic and technological stagnation gripping their country. Not only did these reforms fail to revive the Soviet economy, a critical mass of Soviet citizens either rejected reformed Communism or embraced some derivative of historical nationalism.

The fallout of the Soviet collapse took different forms in different places. In Kyiv, for example, two decades of democratic advances, reversals, corruption scandals, public

protests, and armed aggression resulted in an increasingly open liberal democracy. In Moscow, more extreme crises provoked more extreme reactions. By 1993, Russian president Boris Yeltsin's radical free-market reforms had metastasized into political deadlock. He solved the problem by ordering the armed forces to disperse parliament by force, including the use of tank fire against the Russian White House which housed them. Yeltsin's rule developed into incompetent cynicism as oligarchs and organised crime absorbed the majority of the remaining Russian economy. His successor, Vladimir Putin, moved past this cynicism by abandoning the pretense of belonging to a universal democratic world in favour of a chauvinistic Russian imperialism. In a 2021 essay, which lays out his reasoning for the full-scale invasion Ukraine a year later, Putin speaks to the importance of this historical view: in Putin's view, "the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia," meaning that an independent Ukraine, by definition, was illegitimate.¹⁶ Fukuyama was right to warn us that the very "boredom," engendered by the reduction of politics to "economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of Western consumer demands," might "serve to get history started again."¹⁷

If one worked hard enough to ignore the return of history in the 1990s and early 2000s, it might have been possible to believe that we were on our way to a post-historical world. As both former Cold War rivals cut their military budgets, new concepts such as the "Responsibility to Protect," or "human security," seemed to offer a viable replacements for traditional power politics. After all, while Russian tanks might have fired on the Russian parliament, and while the Russian army might have killed thousands of civilians in a brutal campaign in Chechnya, the Russian foreign ministry and Russian military provided important support to the UN and NATO interventions in the former Yugoslavia and participated in joint European security dialogues under the NATO Partnership for Peace. Five years after Chinese troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) crushed the protests in Tiananmen Square, the first reliance connection in the People's Republic of China went live.

These developments were welcomed by many Canadians, who, as a whole, lack a serious tradition of strategic calculation. Although many Canadians have proven to be apt strategic thinkers, low defence spending and the low priority of defence issues in Canadian elections is a constant of Canadian political life, and Canadian universities provide thin offerings on military history or strategic studies. The numbers speak for themselves. In 2011, the federal government withdrew funding from the Security and Defence Forum, an inexpensive \$2.5M project to foster expertise in defence issues, in favour of targeted grants to meet departmental priorities. This focus on projects and individual grants resulted in an emphasis on product over long-term depth of knowledge. While many in government rightly criticised academics for using SDF funds to chase academic fads instead of relevant policy issues, the current MiNDS programme, ironically, chases immediate policy fads such as culture change, NORAD modernisation, and "transforming military culture."¹⁸ For many Canadians, as for those awarding MiNDS grants, "strategy" is a collection of discrete problems, not the long-term pursuit of the vital national interest over decades, if not generations. While such topics are important, this fragmented approach to understanding national security issues might do little more than provide good answers to inadequate questions.

Without the expertise required to ask good questions, we will never get satisfactory answers. As Chinese firms build up powerful artificial intelligence capabilities behind the Great Firewall, Ukrainian soldiers battle against both Russian and North Korean troops in the Kursk salient, and the French government openly contemplates sending European troops to Greenland as a deterrent against unilateral American annexation, we might do well to take a wider and deeper view of strategic issues. It may, therefore, be worthwhile to turn our attention towards a more distant future, and to consider the long term basis of Canadian security and Canadian defence. Let us therefore take the same bold, four-decade stride into the future that Sutherland took in 1962 - and contemplate the Canadian strategic situation in 2065. By looking towards the far horizon, even if we cannot see it very clearly, we may, perhaps, be able to perceive the present in somewhat clearer perspective.

In the face of so many gross uncertainties, one may well ask if there is anything about Canadian security in the year 2065 of which one can be reasonably sure? The answer, surprisingly enough, is yes. There are some things which are not likely to change very much, such as geography, economic potential and broad national interests. To borrow a term from mathematics, these can be described as invariants of Canadian strategic conditions and strategic choice. It is worth examining these rather carefully because they shed a great deal of light upon the foundations of Canada's national existence and her place in the world community. They determine, to some very considerable extent, the agenda of Canadian national policy - that is, those major questions with regard to which there is some genuine choice. They also reveal important areas where there is no choice, however much we as Canadians might like to believe that there is.

Physical Geography

The most important of these invariants is geography. For the sake of this analysis, I will assume that by 2065, the borders of Canada, the United States and Mexico will not have changed considerably. Although that scenario is a theoretical possibility, should it come to pass, we would probably no longer be discussing *Canada's* long-term strategic situation. There is no serious military possibility of resisting an American invasion - even a few nuclear weapons would be unlikely to deter a country with the missile defence capabilities possessed by the United States, and an insurgency would be unlikely to succeed against an occupying power that could prevent foreign military assistance from reaching the insurgents. Let us, then, examine the borders as they are.

The geographical facts of our current borders come with two vitally important strategic consequences. The first is that there are no reasonable means by which the Canadian state will be able to secure Canadian borders unilaterally. The sheer size and impassibility of the Arctic would require a massive air force and navy to secure by force - military forces which the relatively small Canadian population simply cannot generate. The second is that the United States is bound to defend Canada from external aggression, regardless of whether or not Canadians wish to be defended - a sort of *involuntary guarantee*.

Although Sutherland coined the term "involuntary guarantee," it had long been the basis of many important strategic decisions. In 1864, Confederate sympathisers operating out of the Province of Canada provoked a crisis when they crossed the border to attack the

Vermont town of St. Albans. John A Macdonald, then serving as premier of the Province of Canada, acted quickly by establishing a secret police force to prevent further Confederate operations from Canadian soil - as well pre-empt calls from some American military leaders to secure the Canadian approaches by force.¹⁹ As prime minister of the new Dominion of Canada, Macdonald led his Cabinet to authorise a military deployments against a Metis and Indigenous resistance movements at Red River in 1870 and 1885, and in both cases, a good deal of his reasoning involved the need to communicate to American presidents Ulysses S. Grant (1870) and Grover Cleveland (1885) the same message he had sent to Abraham Lincoln in 1864: we may not be strong enough to resist a full-scale invasion, but we can project enough power to make American military intervention unnecessary.

There is an important corollary to this line of thinking - if we cannot, with our own resources, secure Canadian territory with purely Canadian means, we can secure a voluntary, *mutual guarantee* of continental security through military cooperation with the United States. During the crisis provoked by the fall of France in the Summer of 1940, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King negotiated a bilateral security pact with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at Ogdensburg, New York. This agreement established a joint planning body, the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), allowed representatives of the much smaller Canadian military to influence American contingency planning for continental defence in the event of a British collapse. Although early PJBD plans placed Canadian military forces under direct US command in the event of a disaster, Canadian representatives clawed this commitment back after the American entry into the war.

This kind of military diplomacy continued during the Cold War. Given that both the United States and Canada were members of NATO, it seems logical that the combined air defence of North America would fall under a new NATO command. Yet the leadership of NATO commands tended to default to whichever nation contributed the most forces - and that would have invariably meant permanent American stewardship of Canadian airspace. The bilateral NORAD agreement, however, allocated operational *control* to a joint command under specific circumstances, with control being exercised by a series of regional commanders, including Canadian commanders. Moreover, convention dictated that the NORAD Deputy Commander would always be a Canadian. This agreement thus benefited both sides: The Americans would not need to worry about a surprise attack by Soviet bombers over the North Pole, and the Canadian government and Canadian military representatives gained significant influence in a truly joint defence of the North American continent.

Political Geography

This project of continental integration, which began in Sutherland's youth with the Ogdensburg and Hyde Park agreements, grew during his working life with the NORAD and Autopact agreements, and peaked with NAFTA, has effectively come to an end. The "official" end of this project were the threats of annexation and arbitrary tariffs imposed by the Trump administration in February 2025, but it was already in trouble before his inauguration and is likely to continue afterwards. The Biden administration spoke of economic integration with allies for key supply chain materials as "friendshoring," but this was little more than a buzzword with little accompanying policy. Even then, friendshoring was framed in narrow

terms about protecting American security by guaranteeing American access to vital defence goods, not as a means by which the United States could exercise global leadership. As an economic slogan, the protectionist “buy American,” had more sway in the White House, and much more importantly, in Congress. Although extensive economic and military cooperation between Canada and the United States will no doubt continue well through 2065, this cooperation will be framed as part of a harsher, zero-sum game.

Economic cooperation will be complicated further still by a decline of the United States as a global leader. It would be a mistake to think that the United States will not remain *globally powerful*, but this is not the same thing as *maintaining global leadership*. When Sutherland wrote his original script in 1962, the United States was less powerful, relative to its military competitors, than it is today. Although the Americans had a far superior nuclear arsenal to the Soviet Union, they also found it difficult to translate that nuclear superiority into conventional deterrence. The Soviets far outmatched the Americans, and their NATO allies, in the quantity of conventional forces in Europe. The Soviets had also been the first nation to put an artificial satellite into orbit and the first nation to put a human into space, and this lead continued well after 1962 - Soviet cosmonaut Alexi Leonov conducted the first spacewalk in 1965, and the Soviet *Luna 9* was the first unmanned lander to conduct a soft landing on the lunar surface in February 1966.

Today, however, the American military remains unmatched in terms of capability and the United States dominates outer space. The Russians stopped being serious military rivals when their carefully modernised army was laid to waste in Ukraine. Although Putin's forces may be able to achieve gains by throwing a sheer weight of outdated equipment at Ukrainian lines, the writing is on the wall for the Russian defence industry, which relies on exports to sustain research and development budgets: the vaunted next-generation T-14 *Armata* main battle tank has been halted, production of the fifth-generation Su-57 combat aircraft has been hampered by heavy sanctions, and the sole Russian aircraft carrier is effectively out of commission. Although Chinese military expansion and modernisation might be worrying, the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) is still very much a regional military power. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) fields two conventionally-powered aircraft carriers, with a third on the way. The US Navy (USN), by contrast, fields eleven nuclear-powered supercarriers, has two more supercarriers in construction, and also fields nine smaller amphibious assault ships, each with their own complement of aircraft. NASA and American space launch firms out more weight of satellites into orbit than the rest of the world *combined*. Regardless of domestic political difficulties, the United States will remain the leading military and technological force for the foreseeable future.

But even for those states that could establish themselves as global leaders, they all eventually experienced exhaustion - not just of resources, but of willpower and focus. The Roman Empire reached its greatest extent in 177 CE, but fractured into three decades of civil war fifty years later - a war that started with an exhausted and under-resourced frontier garrisons murdered a visiting emperor. The British intentionally devolved power to a new Canadian parliament in 1867, with the dominions of Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa established in the following decades. Following the First World War, the British government and the British public proved more willing to grant Ireland dominion status in

1922 than to risk further conflict and loss of life. In the 1930s, the British struggled further still and surrendered their financial leadership by making Sterling non-convertible. Following the Second World War, the British gave up on maintaining influence in the Balkans by ending their sponsorship of the Greek government's war against Communist rebels, and the rapid decolonisation which followed reflected a similar financial and moral fatigue. The insecure parochialism of the Brexit debate, poorly-executed withdrawal negotiations, and chaotic implementation of the exit suggests that the British have not yet recovered.

The United States appears to be entering a similar phase of self-centered, self-imposed, and self-defeating decline. In January 1941, at the opening of the period of American global leadership, Franklin Delano Roosevelt told Congress that:

Armed defense of democratic existence is now being gallantly waged in four continents. If that defense fails, all the population and all the resources of Europe, Asia, Africa and Australasia will be dominated by the conquerors. Let us remember that the total of those populations and their resources in those four continents greatly exceeds the sum total of the population and the resources of the whole of the Western Hemisphere-many times over.

In times like these it is immature--and incidentally, untrue--for anybody to brag that an unprepared America, single-handed, and with one hand tied behind its back, can hold off the whole world.

No realistic American can expect from a dictator's peace international generosity, or return of true independence, or world disarmament, or freedom of expression, or freedom of religion -or even good business.

*Such a peace would bring no security for us or for our neighbors. "Those, who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety."*²⁰

Roosevelt's vision defined the American approach to world affairs for the following eighty years. American foreign policy failures, from the Vietnam War through the invasion of Iraq, were either defined by a naïve belief in the universality of American values or an arrogant overconfidence in the extent of American power. There were few greater insults in American political life than being called a cynic, even during unseemly scandal. In late 1986, Ronald Reagan's administration was caught illegally selling weapons to Iran to secure the release of American hostages, then using the covert funds fund the Contra insurgents in Nicaragua. Although he was not aware of all aspects of the operation, the president accepted responsibility for the affair on a national television, acknowledged it was wrong, but still felt it was necessary to argue that he acted out of compassion for the hostages, his belief in the "cause of the Contras," and that he erred because "I was stubborn in my pursuit of a policy that went astray."²¹ This political reality helped shape Sutherland's worldview:

In Canada's case, her strongest natural alignment is with the United States. This is based upon close economic ties and the fact that Canada relies upon the United States for her security. But there is also a

*cultural affinity, a basic compatibility of social institutions and attitudes which goes beyond any ordinary conception of common interests. Canada and the United States are joint participants in the much criticized and greatly envied North America civilization of the twentieth century. As this civilization is their common property, its survival is their common concern.*²²

His assumptions about a “natural,” alliance of Western democracies, valid in 1962, no longer apply. Trump’s annexation threats against NATO allies, and, worse still, his public attempts to extort, and demand for fealty from, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy did not occur in isolation. Trump was re-elected by the American public, including, the popular vote, and maintains a close control over the same political party to which Reagan belonged. It is safe to assume that the era of American leadership ushered in by Roosevelt and enjoyed by Sutherland has come to an end, at least for a generation. Economic and geographic circumstances will always compel some degree of natural alignment with the United States, but the political culture which sustained a natural alliance no longer exists.

The Political Economy of Canadian Strategic Choice

The strategic options open to Canadian decision-makers are much less palatable today than they were in 1962. In his original talk, Sutherland spent considerable time in debunking a popular book, *Peace-Maker or Powder-Monkey*, where journalist James Minifie argued for a policy of neutrality in the Cold War.²³ In Sutherland’s view, a *de jure* withdrawal from NATO and NORAD would not change the *de facto* realities of the involuntary guarantee or superpower competition. The only two “real alternatives,” then, were for Canada to be either a “powerful and effective ally” or a “weak and reluctant one.”²⁴ The fact of the matter is that Canadians, as a whole, have elected to be a weak and reluctant ally for decades, enjoying a feast of economic prosperity and stability provided by the American-led world order with little thought for the future, and now we must grapple with the consequences of our gluttony.

If we are to moderate our overindulgence, we should also avoid fad diets. Spending money on the military makes little sense unless you have a strategic end in mind, and ideally, some idea of specific capabilities to achieve that end. Because Canadians lack a long-term habit of thinking about using the military as a legitimate component of the long-term pursuit of the national interest, there is no real strategic tradition to draw on. Canadians may rightly ask, specifically, what the *end* of a defence policy or a military budget might be, since there are few specific, tangible aims for what defence spending might achieve. It may seem trite to argue that keeping a military capability alive is an important part of remaining an effective member of the international community. But it is. When we fund embassies in foreign capitals, do we expect specific outcomes, or do we view the operation of well-staffed embassies as an important markers of statehood?

The result has been decades of political neglect and military confusion. In 1960, Canadian defence spending constituted 4% of GDP, held roughly at 2% of GDP between 1970 and 1990, fell below 1.6% of GDP in 1996, and has not recovered since.²⁵ Worse still, Canadian

governments ask great things of these diminutive budgets. Not only do major purchases need to equip soldiers, sailors, and aviators to achieve demanding missions in dangerous environments, they also need to pass through a tortuous procurement process informed by the Industrial Technical Benefits (ITB) policy to function as an inefficient industrial subsidy. This double-hatting encourages the acquisition of limited runs of bespoke equipment that would be difficult to scale up in wartime and discourages the kind of international collaboration on major weapons systems pursued by European powers.

This muddled approach to military affairs sends powerful signals, domestically and internationally, that Canada is not serious about contributing to the Atlantic order from which Canadians benefit. One of the reasons that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine is so threatening to the Canadian national interest is that it challenges the international norm which holds that larger neighbours cannot annex neighbouring states on the basis of an imagined sphere of influence. Most of the smaller NATO members reacted accordingly. Poland, a country with a smaller population of Canada's and half of the GDP per capita, doubled defence expenditures and signed contracts for hundreds of new armoured fighting vehicles, artillery systems, and aircraft. The Baltic states all dramatically increased defence expenditures, met their 2% target, and provided significant aid to Ukraine. Finland, which only joined the alliance in 2023, boosted spending to meet the exceed the 2% target within two years. Other smaller, and significantly poorer, allies such as Romania, Czechia, and Bulgaria all found ways to meet their alliance commitments. In that same time, Canada found another tenth of a percentage of GDP to allocate to defence, well below the target, along with a large consignment of complaints, excuses, and promises to do more at some very distant date in the future.²⁶ If we cannot act with the kind of responsibility and self-respect expected of an independent state - especially in the wake of a much larger power bullying a smaller, culturally-related neighbour - should we really be surprised that the president of the United States speaks so openly of annexation? And can we really expect the rest of NATO, who have tightened their belts while we have enjoyed the banquet, step in to help us mitigate the consequences of our indulgence?

Since we must now react to the current crisis from a position of military, diplomatic, and industrial weakness, our choices will be severely constrained, and all will be painful. Finding the money to build up enough of a military capability to matter diplomatically while suffering from the consequences of a trade war will be unpleasant. The situation will be made more unpalatable still because our thin defence-industrial base will not be able to absorb significant increases in defence spending, meaning that there will be no way to avoid significant outflows of hard currency in the midst of a looming economic crisis. Yet painful as it will be, there are still some real and significant differences that inform distinct, feasible alternatives going forward.

Pay the Danegeld

The easiest, and likely the cheapest, alternative would be to purchase large quantities of American weapons, and deepen continental defence cooperation. The sheer size of the American defence industry and depth of American reserve stocks means that any additional Canadian spending would quickly result in more equipment in Canadian hands. Although

Canadian purchases of the most sought-after American equipment, such as the HIMARS rocket artillery system, would require a few years of waiting in the queue behind other customers, the financial commitment alone would result in warmer relations with Washington. Going forward, it might be possible to revive the Canadian defence-industrial base by linking it to the American behemoth, as the Norwegians have done with their NASAMS air defence missile project and the Australians with joint submarine construction under the AUKUS pact.²⁷

In this alternative, making enough defence commitments to negotiate our way into AUKUS should be the central aim of a renewed defence policy. American presidents have complained about the military spending of smaller NATO allies from the inception of the alliance, and the current president has threatened to use force to annex Greenland, the territory of a fellow NATO member. Continental security cooperation goes back to the Ogdensburg Agreement of 1940, and thus predates NATO anyways, plus, NORAD has proven to be a successful model of ensuring a voluntary guarantee to build on.

Although this might be the simplest way forward on a technical level, it is now a political impossibility. Both the Canadian public and the Trump administration would see the sudden purchase of American weaponry and closer coordination with the United States military as a capitulation, and they would be right to think so. Had the government pushed to join AUKUS or purchase an upgraded suite of American weapons *before* the current crisis, perhaps the Canadian public, and more importantly, the policy-making elite of the United States, could be persuaded to perceive this change of course as a junior but independent partner renewing a profitable alliance. But taking this action *after* threats of annexation or economic strangulation is akin to the wishful thinking of English and French kings who paid the *danegeld* in hopes of avoiding Viking incursions. Spending large sums on American weapons would encourage further bullying, and American bullying would make long-term Canadian military investments difficult to sustain.

Strategic Independence and Armed Neutrality

Opposite the alternative of continental integration is that of strategic independence and armed neutrality. In this scenario, the Canadian government implements a serious review of foreign policy, defence policy and industrial policy with the aim of reducing, as much as possible, reliance on larger powers. Advocates for this course of action have a long lineage in policy and academic debates on Canadian strategy - indeed, Sutherland's original article was inspired largely by Minifie's proposals for Canadian armed neutrality in the 1960s. At first glance, the case for strategic independence from the United States and NATO is very appealing, and seems to cut through our current strategic dilemma. If the Americans are forced to - or find pretext to - invoke the involuntary guarantee, military integration with the Americans would represent a significant vulnerability. Since our European allies are an ocean away and have their own security problems, they are unlikely to come to Canada's aid if it is threatened by the United States, NATO commitments would also be a poor investment.

However appealing this line of reasoning might first appear, there are serious technological, economic, and military reasons that this approach cannot work - Canada is just too big

geographically, too small demographically, and too vulnerable economically to develop true strategic independence. To avoid becoming a security threat to the United States, the Canadian military would need to monitor the entirety of the North by both sea and air, then deploy enough aircraft, surface, and subsurface vessels to deny the area to the sophisticated naval and air forces of the Russian Federation and the PRC - and we would have to do it *to the satisfaction of the United States*. Thus besides being technically and economically unviable, armed, independent, neutrality is also logically impossible.

Indeed, it appears that the global strategic balance seems to agitate against armed neutrality. Until 2014, Ukraine was officially neutral on the Finnish model, and possessed much more military hardware to defend much less territory than that of Canada. Finlandization, however, did not save them from a partial invasion in 2014 nor a full-scale invasion in 2022. It is no surprise that following the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the Finns themselves elected to abandon finlandization and joined NATO in 2023. Next door in Sweden, the government in Stockholm ended two centuries of neutrality by joining the alliance in 2024.

Strategic Autonomy

Canada has missed the moment to re-establish the voluntary guarantee with the United States, and our national political economy precludes us from establishing meaningful strategic independence. The most workable way forward, therefore, is a middle path - that of strategic autonomy.

One of the main strengths of the Atlantic security system constructed since 1945 has been, ironically, its unruliness. Any historian of NATO will note that the alliance seems to be perpetually in some kind of crisis, be it from political disputes between members, disagreements over doctrine, or concerns about technological change. Yet it perseveres, and recently, has even expanded, and has influence far beyond formal alliance boundaries. Because NATO technical standardisation is an open set of standards, different allies, and even non-NATO allies, can fill strategic gaps on their own initiative. Take, for example, the defence-industrial cooperation between Poland and South Korea. Following the US withdrawal from Vietnam in the 1970s and military export restrictions imposed on Taiwan in the 1980s, the South Korean government implemented an industrial policy to ensure domestic weapons production. But while the South Korean industry is designed to lessen dependence on controlled American technologies, known as ITAR,²⁸ is also produced weapons that are compatible with American, and hence NATO, standard calibres of ammunition, armoured protection ratings, and communications systems. These choices by a non-NATO member ultimately strengthened the Western security system. When the Polish government went looking for suppliers of new military equipment in 2022, they were able to not just purchase South Korean K2 main battle tanks, but could also collaborate with South Korean firms to establish a new tank factory in Poland, thus strengthening NATO's overall defence-industrial base.

This heterogeneity goes beyond the mere technical. One of the biggest strategic problems confronting NATO planners in the 1950s and 1960s was the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella over small European allies. Charles de Gaulle, with good reason, wondered whether an American president would be willing to sacrifice New York to defend Paris in

the event a Soviet invasion of Western Europe escalated to a thermonuclear exchange. De Gaulle did not think they would, and drove the French nuclear programme to produce workable weapons in the early 1960s. Robert McNamara, the defense secretary for both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, along with his coterie of civilian defence intellectuals, condemned the French nuclear programme as destabilising and bad for alliance unity. Yet in practice, the Americans took no action against the French, and more recent studies of American nuclear strategy reveal that McNamara's public statements on the need to carefully centralise and control nuclear escalation were largely for political, not practical consumption.²⁹ In practice, the French *force de dissuasion* acted as a European-controlled escalation mechanism which actually strengthened the *American* nuclear guarantee to other NATO allies. There should be no doubt that the French drive to build an independent deterrent, along with the French decision to leave NATO's unified command structure in 1966, put a severe strain on the alliance. But on balance, the flexibility and heterogeneity of NATO's command structure ultimately benefited the alliance.³⁰

Strategic Discipline

Autonomy, however, is different from iconoclasm. During the unification process of the 1960s, the Canadian government and Canadian military experimented with radical changes to force structure, organisation, and roles. The newly-unified CAF acquired CF-5 light fighter aircraft and the air-deployable, wheeled, AVGP armoured vehicle family, which, along with a re-rolling of the Canadian ground and air commitments to NATO's standing forces, were supposed to allow for more interoperability between NORAD, NATO, and peacekeeping tasks. In theory, at least. In practice, the sheer disorganisation of the unification process, along with a lack of funding, however, only served to diminish Canadian influence with allies.

The French, South Korean, and Polish approaches to autonomy work because those governments were, and are still, willing to spend considerable economic and political capital to maintain key capabilities - key capabilities which ultimately benefit the entire Western security system. Besides this willingness to spend, their national leaders have also demonstrated considerable discipline in picking which capabilities to focus their industrial resources on. The French government turns to considerable French defence industry, which can supply Paris with nuclear weapons and nuclear delivery systems - at the same time, however, they also gave up on the inefficient and redundant work of designing new service rifles in favour of a reliable German model.

There was a brief period when Canadian governments demonstrated this level of discipline. In the two decades following the end of the Second World War, prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King rejected a military proposal to build an independent Canadian nuclear programme, pointing out, rightly, that a small, independent arsenal would be both expensive and of little strategic utility. At the same time, his cabinet consolidated key wartime industries into Crown corporations, such as Canadair, and established the DRB to coordinate military research across the services and with universities. His successor, Louis St-Laurent, oversaw the creation of the Department of Defence Production (DDP) in 1951 to coordinate military purchases during a boom in defence spending during the Korean War,

and military procurement was both flexible and pragmatic. For example, during the early planning for a Canadian land forces contribution to the Korean War, Canadian Army leaders wanted to equip the contingent with American weapons. When American equipment proved unavailable in sufficient quantities, the Canadians mostly reverted to British equipment, and, as a bonus, this kit was familiar to many of the veterans of the Second World War that filled the reformed ranks.³¹ Meanwhile, back at home, the government invested heavily in the Avro Canada CF-100 Canuck interceptor programme and the innovative semi-automated radars of the Mid-Canada Line, a combination which enabled the combined air defence of North America to begin further north - and hence further away from the bulk of the Canadian population - than the joint USAF-RCAF Pinetree line allowed. The Orenda jet engine, a spinoff of the Canuck programme, eventually equipped licence-built F-86 Sabre produced by Canadair - a project so successful that not only did Canadair sell Canadian Sabres to the UK and Germany, but also back to the United States.³²

By the late 1950s, however, this discipline and investment began to wane. The Canadian military establishment had a hard time balancing priorities or giving coherent advice in the brave new world of thermonuclear weapons, war of decolonisation, and nascent computerisation. The poor management, delays, and spiralling costs associated with the CF-105 *Arrow*, a high-performance interceptor set to replace the *Canuck*, drained defence budgets just as the post-war economic boom began to cool off. Still, there were some successes. General Charles Foulkes, the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, strengthened inter-service bodies, established the Directorate of Strategic Studies as an element of this strengthened joint staff, and had the good sense to recommend that prime minister John Diefenbaker to cancel the *Arrow* programme. Although Diefenbaker's management of the defence file was, at best, haphazard, he did leave key institutions, such as the DRB, DSS, and DDP in place.³³

Ironically, the ability to manage a “unified” defence and industrial policy was destroyed by the unification reforms of the 1960s and associated reforms in the 1970s. For over a decade, a constant shuffle of headquarters functions, mergers, and doctrinal experiments interfered with long-term planning. The maelstrom also consumed the DRB and the DDP. Without these bodies, defence procurement has devolved into a series of industrial targets, not a process of long-term planning in support of the national interest.

Re-discovering Strategic Autonomy and Building Strategic Discipline

It is impossible to answer the question of how to regain strategic autonomy because it is impossible to ask it. Regaining strategic autonomy will require asking and answering literally hundreds, if not thousands, of related questions simultaneously - from questions of high policy to questions about the sourcing of semiconductors. We need the institutions and expertise to ask these variegated questions at the same time in widely separated fields with enough coordination to ensure mutually intelligible answers, but not so much that we stifle creativity and initiative. I will not presume to have the answers to the question of asking the perfect question, but I will suggest a few things that we should pursue or avoid.

The most important thing to avoid is a singular named concept, such as “flexible response,” “Canada First,” “Pacific Pivot,” or some similar term to guide and control strategic planning at all levels of government. While an official doctrinal hierarchy is comforting to those making strategic decisions, these official doctrines usually serve to diminish responsibility for decision-making, stifle critical thinking, and confuse both the public and government officials. Worse still, because these slogans tend to be associated with the initiative of a specific government, they almost by definition require replacement after an election.

Instead of disposable, poorly-defined slogans, we should agree on a few question and concepts to help us determine where there is some genuine choice in our national policy. In his original article, Sutherland argued that there were essentially two strategic alternatives open to Canadian decision-makers:

What are the real alternatives? It seems evident that in the future as at present Canada will remain an American ally. This is the result of our geography, but in an even more compelling sense it is dictated by our interests. The question is whether we will be a powerful and effective ally or a weak and reluctant one. There is a parallel choice: whether our role in world affairs will be one of dependence upon the United States or whether we will be effective members of a larger community. This is a genuine choice, and, indeed, one which we cannot avoid.³⁴

The present author cannot find a better set of premises on which to base a national policy or grand strategy. The fundamental and overriding goal of Canadian national policy, should be to remain an effective ally with the strength and self-confidence to cooperate, to support, and, if need be, to disagree with our friends. In practice, this will require us to invest not just in our military, but also in the kind of education that produces strategic expertise - international relations, military and diplomatic history, systems analysis, and operational research, among many other fields. While it may seem wasteful to sponsor chairs and research centres that do not have a defined “deliverable” or “policy outcomes,” in absolute terms, it would be a rounding error in government spending - and a good bargain if one remembers that strategy is a process requiring insight and investment, not a series of discrete questions that can be answered by purchasing bespoke studies.

This emphasis on process over concrete outcomes should also be reflected in our military procurements and defence industrial policy. At present, these decisions are driven by the highly-specific requirements defined by various elements of the armed forces and the equally specific, and often incompatible, demands of public servants enforcing an industrial policy. Recalling his experience in the First World War, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau quipped that “war is too important to be left to the generals.” Military procurement is similarly so important that it should be left *neither* to the generals *nor* the Treasury Board, nor, for that matter, the whims of ministers. Instead of stickhandling complex procurements between different ministries with different mandates, a revived DDP could both encourage the development of an efficient and sustainable defence industrial base while also imposing strategic discipline on the armed forces and other government departments. This kind of national level coordination would also facilitate participation in international weapons and development programmes.

Technical expertise and technical competence will mean little in the long run unless there is a reliable, efficient interface between advisors and decision-makers. At present, the Canadian state lacks this kind of coordinating body, akin to the National Security Council in the United States. The current smattering of parliamentary committees, cannot do the kind of long-range planning required for providing solid advice on so many questions because they cannot employ substantial secretariats of full-time, non-elected experts. Departmental and interdepartmental committees tend to report to one or two ministers, and are liable to significant disruption during elections. A permanent sitting body, with parliamentary, public service, military, academic, a dedicated staff, and, crucially, a cross-party consensus on their mandate, would not provide all the answers for the road ahead - but they might provide some useful questions.

Summing Up

This distinction between an identity as a powerful and effective - or, in other words, autonomous - ally making real choices or a weak and reluctant American satellite is more than academic. It is existential. We have inherited an imperfect country - one with a legacy of conflict, colonialism, and division. These legacies have not been resolved, nor is it likely that they ever truly can be. Yet if we carry the responsibility of these legacies, we also carry the responsibility of our inheritance. The inheritance of the Great Peace of Montreal; of Richard Pierrepont, a formerly enslaved man who raised a unit of Black loyalists and fought at Queenston Heights alongside Six Nations warriors, Upper Canadian militia, and British regulars; of the 11, 285 names of the Great War missing inscribed on the Vimy memorial; of the Canadians who struggled through the hard times of the Depression, but who still found the strength to build a war machine that inflicted considerable damage on the Nazi regime; of those diligent and responsible leaders who found a way to translate that destructive capacity into prosperity; of those with the good sense and common decency to open our shores to the talent and ambition of people from every corner of the world; of those generations, from the *filles du roi* to more recent arrivals who made the uncertain journey here and built something; of those Canadians and Americans who transformed a continental rivalry into a successful alliance of two diverse democracies; to those Indigenous peoples who resisted the worst impulses of the Canadian state and forced - and are still forcing - us to find a better way forward. To all of these people, we owe it to make a go of it as Canadians, even if we can never seem to find certainty on what, precisely, a "Canadian," is. The people of a resentful protectorate cannot measure up to this inheritance.

The negative choice to not be a protectorate is an easy one to make. The positive choices about policy and strategy required to act on it, however, will be much less comfortable. No amount of national feeling can remove the strategic invariants which limit Canadian strategic choice. Canadian geography will always make it unlikely that Canadians can secure their own territory unilaterally, and it will also ensure that the United States, in one form or another, the prime factor external factor in Canadian defence and economic policy. Our export economy, prosperity, and political culture will, for the foreseeable future, mark us as a member of the informal "Western," club of wealthy democracies. Although the "West," is an imprecise concept that includes the geographically Asian countries of South Korea and

Japan, or the relatively poor and war-torn people of Ukraine, it is, in practice, very much a reality: Ukrainian soldiers are equipped with defence goods from South Korea, Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States, whereas their Russian opponents are supported by military imports from the PRC, Iran, and North Korea. However much some Canadians might like to think themselves above such alignments, it is highly unlikely that the leaders or populations of fellow democracies in Europe or Asia would view a Canadian withdrawal from collective defence and collective security as anything other than a dereliction of duty; moreover, it is equally unlikely that their counterparts in the Global South would take the idea of Canadian neutrality seriously.

Because the tension between these invariants can never be overcome, the *what* of strategy is less important than the *how*. Since the preservation of Canadian sovereignty rests on the maintenance of the Western security system, and ideally, the rules-based international order, Canadian decision-makers will rarely have the luxury of intuitive choices about defence and foreign policy. Arctic sovereignty, for example, will require some military presence, but there will never be enough icebreakers to secure the North by national means alone – indeed, some of the most effective means of preserving Arctic sovereignty involve deploying Canadian soldiers to Latvia and Canadian sailors to the Taiwan Strait. Because of the great distances between Canada and the rest of the world, however, determining the composition of these forces require thousands of technical decisions that are all impacted by economic and political implications. Similarly, there is no such thing as “pure” economic or trade policy – the decision to sell, or not to sell, hydrocarbons, sensitive technology, or other resources to one state over another will always come with long-term strategic implications. Even “pure” diplomacy should be regarded with scepticism. History has not ended, and many of the challenges we face today reflect similar challenges that Sutherland contemplated in 1962 – and it is very likely that they are also similar to the challenges that will confront our successors in 2065 . If we want to thrive in an historical world, we will need to develop the capacity to ask useful questions about power and policy — only then will we get useful answers.

Endnotes

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