



## **CANADIAN DEFENCE POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: AN ASSESSMENT OF CAPABILITIES AND COMMITMENTS**

**Date:** November 20, 2024

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 20, 2024, Dr. Philippe Lagassé presented *Canadian Defence Policy in the 21st Century: An Assessment of Capabilities and Commitments* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed addressed the state of Canadian defence, focusing on current challenges, future prospects, and lingering issues in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Canada's ability to defend itself, fulfill international commitments, and respond to crises at home and abroad is at risk due to systemic challenges within the CAF, Dr. Lagassé argued. He highlighted critical issues such as personnel shortages, aging infrastructure, and an inefficient procurement system that weakens the military's operational readiness. While recent investments in modern capabilities offer hope, Dr. Lagassé stressed that these efforts must be paired with fundamental reforms in recruitment, retention, and digital infrastructure to capitalize on the full potential of these advancements. Dr. Lagassé emphasized that resolving these issues is essential to ensure the CAF remains a credible and capable force in an increasingly volatile global environment.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Presentation**

Dr. Lagassé's address provided an in-depth analysis of the current state of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), its challenges, and the steps being taken to address them, starting by painting a sobering picture of the CAF's current state.

He referenced Minister Blair's remarks on the “death spiral” facing the CAF, which primarily pertains to personnel shortages. The CAF is approximately 16,000 members short of its regular force requirements. Although recruitment is not the main issue, processing and training delays discourage potential recruits, as lengthy waiting periods and bureaucratic hurdles push them toward other opportunities. Retention is equally problematic, as personnel leave due to inadequate family support policies, uncompetitive salaries compared to the private sector, and increasing workloads caused by reduced staffing. This creates a vicious cycle where the remaining members face mounting pressure, exacerbating the problem.

Operationally, the CAF is under-equipped to fulfill its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) framework nation role in Latvia, a position taken reluctantly due to the state of its forces. Dr. Lagassé noted that this decision reflects Canada's broader tendency to resist such roles initially but ultimately accept them under international pressure. However, this commitment comes with significant risks, as the CAF would struggle to defend against a Russian attack in its current state. Domestically, frequent deployments for disaster response, such as managing forest fires, further strain the CAF's ability to perform its core international missions. This burden is expected to worsen with climate change and potential future challenges, such as managing migration surges at the Canada-U.S. border. This growing reliance on the military for domestic emergencies highlights the need for alternative solutions, such as a dedicated civilian response force, though Dr. Lagassé acknowledged that establishing such a force would take years and would likely further draw resources away from the CAF.

Infrastructure issues compound these challenges. As the largest public real estate holder in Canada, the DND and the CAF grapple with aging buildings that are costly to maintain, often unsafe, and unsuitable for defence in a modern age. Many facilities require decontamination, asbestos removal, or significant modernization. Dr. Lagassé noted that while addressing these issues is essential, it competes with broader national priorities, such as housing construction, which also faces labour shortages.

Dr. Lagassé highlighted procurement as another critical issue, as despite pledging to reach NATO's 2% GDP defence spending target in 2014, successive Canadian governments have consistently fallen short. He attributed this to a slow, risk-averse procurement system that prioritizes avoiding legal risks and ensuring optimal capabilities over timely acquisitions. He cited the prolonged replacement of the Sea King helicopters as a cautionary tale of how over-customization and a

lack of discipline in procurement can lead to significant delays and underperforming equipment. However, he emphasized that this system reflects political and cultural choices rather than procedural flaws. Reforming procurement will require shifting priorities to balance risk avoidance with the urgency of military readiness.

Despite these challenges, Dr. Lagassé identified several reasons for optimism. Since 2017, Canada has initiated a major recapitalization of the CAF, with plans to spend \$200–300 billion on new capabilities over the coming decades. He cited several examples of progress, including the acquisition of 88 F-35 fighter jets, which will begin training in 2025–2026 and fully replace the CF-18 fleet by 2032. Other notable advancements include six new multipurpose VIP transport and refueling aircraft (CC130 Husky), Arctic and offshore patrol ships (AOPS), drones, and the manned airborne intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (MAISR) project. Significant advancements have also been made in surveillance and aerospace capabilities, and the Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) project is underway, although its costing remains a concern. Additionally, NORAD modernization and the recent defence policy update, “Our North Strong and Free,” signal promising developments.

Dr. Lagassé stressed that while new equipment is essential, it is insufficient without addressing recruitment and retention issues. Personnel shortages undermine the effectiveness of any new capability, and solutions to this “death spiral” remain elusive. He also highlighted infrastructure challenges, noting that construction demands across Canada make it difficult to modernize military facilities. He highlighted the pressures faced by military families such as relocation, operational demands, and competition from the private sector as key factors driving attrition. Additionally, he warned that the cost of maintaining and upgrading new capabilities, such as the F-35s and CSCs, will likely push defence spending above 2% of GDP, regardless of current political commitments.

Finally, Dr. Lagassé stressed the need for digital infrastructure to support emerging technologies like cyber defence, AI, and quantum computing. He highlighted the urgency of moving away from outdated, siloed networks and adopting cloud computing solutions. However, he acknowledged the social and legal tension between data sovereignty and the practical advantages of leveraging American turnkey solutions. Without modernization in this area, many of the new capabilities being acquired may fall short of their full potential.

## Question and Answer

*It is a general statement that the broad Canadian public is unaware of the force capability of the CAF — do you believe that if the Canadian public was aware of CAF capabilities this would in turn apply more pressure to improve CAF capability?*

Dr. Lagassé emphasized that the CAF must counter the prevailing narrative of decline by showcasing its modernizing capabilities and the opportunities it offers as a rewarding career. While significant challenges persist, such as outdated infrastructure and personnel shortages, cutting-edge advancements promise operational safety and technological superiority. He stressed the importance of communicating these improvements effectively, particularly to urban and suburban populations, to attract a broader range of recruits and ensure the CAF's future viability.

*Dr. Lagassé, you spoke about risk aversion in Ottawa. Risk adversity can be and often is the great ruiner of both public and private organizations. As a rapidly evolving technological society, a need to be agile in the public sector is essential and risk adversity is largely ill advised. How do you think this cultural norm can be changed to match the needs of the current geopolitical landscape?*

Dr. Lagassé argued that risk aversion within Ottawa's bureaucracy, driven by an incentive structure that discourages bold decisions, is a significant obstacle to addressing Canada's current challenges. Public servants are penalized for taking risks, resulting in a slow, procedural approach that hampers the opportunity to fail early, adapt quickly, and act decisively to issues like foreign interference and shifting global dynamics. He suggested that meaningful change may only come after a significant shock to the system, similar to Canada's transformation following the Second World War.

*Dr. Lagassé — are you aware of any other democratic countries that have reversed their “death spiral”? Are there historical examples of overcoming this “death spiral”?*

Dr. Lagassé explained that the CAF's recruitment and retention challenges are part of a broader issue faced by many countries, driven by aging populations, labour shortages, and competition with the private sector. Unlike nations with mandatory service or systems designed to cycle through personnel quickly, Canada's starting position was already weak, compounding the problem. He argued that addressing this “death spiral” would require a societal shift to better support younger generations and foster a sense of collective responsibility, as

current systems have left many feeling exploited and disconnected from public service.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Dr. Lagassé highlighted severe personnel shortages, outdated infrastructure, and a risk-averse procurement system as key issues undermining CAF readiness and operational capacity.
- The CAF is under-equipped for international commitments, such as its framework nation role in Latvia, and its frequent use in domestic disaster response further strains its ability to fulfill core missions.
- A slow, overly cautious procurement process and aging, unsafe infrastructure hinder modernization efforts, with competing national priorities complicating progress.
- Significant investments since 2017, including F-35 fighter jets, Arctic patrol ships, drones, and NORAD upgrades, signal tangible progress in addressing capability gaps.

### FURTHER READING

Lagassé, P., Massie, J. (2024) Don't Count on Us: Canada's Military Unreadiness. *War on the Rocks*.

Lagassé, P. (2023) Defence Policy and Procurement Costs: The Case for Pessimism Bias, in Thomas Juneau and Philippe Lagassé, eds. *Canadian Defence Policy in Theory and Practice 2023*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Straarup, H. (2023). Canadian Armed Forces Assistance to Law Enforcement and Civil Authorities. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 6(1), 77–81. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v6i1.5409>



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