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Review of "The Price of Alliance: The Politics and Procurement of Leopard Tanks for Canada's NATO Brigade" by Frank Maas

Russell Isinger

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Frank Maas. *The Price of Alliance: The Politics and Procurement of Leopard Tanks for Canada's NATO Brigade*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. Pp. 170.

"Defence procurement," political scientist Kim Richard Nossal has written with considerable understatement, "is not something that Canadians do well."¹ From the historic cases of the Ross rifle and the Avro Arrow to the modern Sea King helicopter replacement and the Victoria-class submarine purchase to the ongoing F-35 Joint Strike Fighter controversy, Canadian defence policy is replete with mismanaged, drawn-out, costly, and politically volatile weapons acquisition processes. One would think there would be a considerable literature devoted to procurement because of this but there is not. Fortunately, University of British Columbia Press, through its excellent Studies in Canadian Military History series, is addressing that gap. Frank Maas has made a well-researched and revealing contribution to this literature with his work on the political and military decision-making behind the procurement of Leopard 1 tanks for 4th Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (hereafter the Brigade), Canada's Cold War contribution to the defence of Western Europe.²

There is a famous story about a 1910 meeting between British General Henry Wilson and French General Ferdinand Foch, commanders of their respective country's staff colleges. "What is the smallest British military force that would be of practical assistance to you?" Wilson is purported to have asked Foch about a future war with Germany. Foch quipped "A single British soldier – and we will see to it that he is killed."³ It could be argued that the Brigade played

¹ Kim Richard Nossal, *Charlie Foxtrot: Fixing Defence Procurement in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2016), 19-20. This is a concise and incisive overview of everything that is wrong with procurement in Canada.

² The two other admirable works on procurement from the series are Aaron Plamondon, *The Politics of Procurement: Military Acquisition in Canada and the Sea King Helicopter* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); and Randall Wakelam, *Cold War Fighters: Canadian Aircraft Procurement, 1945-1954* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011). For a military focused history of the Brigade, see Sean Maloney, *War Without Battles: Canada's NATO Brigade in Europe 1951-1993* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1997). For the less military inclined, an excellent and more readable account that covers the years Maas does not is Isabel Campbell, *Unlikely Diplomats: The Canadian Brigade in Germany, 1951-64* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

³ Margaret MacMillan, ed., *Barbara W. Tuchman: The Guns of August. The Proud Tower* (New York: Library of America, 2012), 64.

a similar role in Europe to that single British soldier, and Canadian defence policy often appeared to Europe to constitute a search for the smallest force that would be of practical assistance. Though no one questioned the professionalism of Canada's military, its size meant that its contribution to the collective security of Europe was more symbolic than real, and therefore of more political than military value. But the continued presence of the Brigade on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) central front, where its survival prospects in the event of a full-scale Soviet armoured thrust were bleak, nevertheless reassured European allies that North America remained committed to their defence. Europeans, "[w]anting the 'cash' of forward deployed troops, cared little for the 'credit' of additional troops in Canada" (p. 5). The Brigade in turn gave Canada some voice in alliance affairs, but as Maas notes, if the presence of the Brigade bought Canada a seat at the table, tanks were the club dues.

By the late 1960s, the Brigade's Centurion tanks were maintenance nightmares shortly to reach the end of their service lives, and the debate over their replacement vexed civil-military decision-makers.⁴ Maas describes the debate as a battle waged between "traditionalists" and "revisionists." The traditionalists—the Departments of National Defence (DND) and External Affairs, supporters of NATO in Cabinet, and Canada's NATO allies—argued for the retention of the Brigade in Europe and equipping it with tanks to make a credible contribution to NATO in support of alliance cohesion and solidarity. The revisionists tended to be civilians, mainly in Cabinet, who were skeptical of the scale of Canada's NATO commitment given Europe's postwar economic recovery and ability to defend themselves, and critical of the scale of the Canadian defence budget, so much of which was being spent in Europe. They argued for a reduced and restructured NATO contribution, perhaps with a deployment away from NATO's central front, or even withdrawal of Canadian forces from Europe entirely. In the revisionists' view, tanks were only required for the defence of Europe and not of Canada, and they should be replaced with a Direct Fire Support Vehicle (DFSV)—smaller, lighter, and air-transportable

⁴ Canada did seriously contemplate simply refurbishing the Centurions to squeeze more life out of them. The Israelis after all had upgraded their Centurions into formidable fighting machines. Though this was a potentially cost-effective solution, it was rejected primarily over parts availability and interoperability as no other NATO ally would remain a Centurion user.

from Canada (which tanks were not); more useful for lower intensity operations within and outside of NATO (such as peacekeeping); and decidedly cheaper.

Though debate about what to do about the Brigade and whether it would be equipped with heavy or light vehicles began under the Liberal government of Prime Minister Lester Pearson in the wake of the 1964 Defence White Paper, discussion at the time was dominated by the traditionalists and little change was contemplated. It was only after Pierre Trudeau, a committed revisionist, came to power in 1968 that the traditionalists found their influence curtailed. After a defence review in 1969, Trudeau announced that the Brigade would be reduced in size and the Centurions would be replaced by DFSVs. This decision that Canada was getting out of the tank business was confirmed in the 1971 Defence White Paper and then confirmed by Cabinet again in 1973 in the face of stiff internal resistance, mostly from Chief of the Defence Staff Lieutenant-General Jacques Dextraze and others in DND. In fact, Maas characterises the extent of bureaucratic obstruction of the revisionists' goals as bordering on subversion of civilian control of the military. By 1975, after yet another defence review, Trudeau altered course, and in 1976 Canada signed a contract to purchase 128 Leopard tanks from West Germany (which, according to Maas' account, proceeded atypically in that it was a highly successful procurement process, aided in no small measure by German government and corporate efficiency).

What had happened to prompt Trudeau's about-face? Maas writes in his introduction that his book contributes to four fields: "the analysis of Trudeau's foreign and defence policies; Canada's relationships with its allies; Canadian defence procurement; and the history of the army, particularly the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps, during the Cold War" (p. 5). However, it is in the first two areas where Maas makes his most important contribution as he reveals the impact Canada's NATO allies had on Trudeau. Maas shows that Trudeau's views evolved considerably over his time in office as he interacted with American and particularly European policy makers who were deeply worried about the precedent a reduction in Canada's commitment might set for other members of NATO. He came to be persuaded of the value of the alliance and Canada's military role in it, symbolic though it might mainly be. It was West Germany which exerted the most influence due to the close personal relationship Trudeau developed with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. As Ivan Head,

Trudeau's principal foreign policy advisor at this time, described it, Schmidt's views had a profound effect on Trudeau:

A German farmer is not able to detect the identity of a NATO aircraft flying overhead as their contrails stream behind them. Besides, he knows that those aircraft can flee westward as quickly as they can fly eastward. He recognizes the maple leaf on tanks and infantry vehicles, however, and knows that there is no escape for them in the event of war. These units are reassuring and important, whether or not there is a persuasive military role for them (p. 91).⁵

As a result, Trudeau shifted camps from the revisionists to the traditionalists and his government subsequently embarked on a large-scale recapitalisation of the Canadian Armed Forces. As Maas concludes, Trudeau "made mistakes, but after 1975, he was a far better prime minister for defence than scholarship or public opinion would suggest, and his defence policy has been unfairly criticized" (p. 132).

Maas addresses one persistent myth about the Leopards. Canada has always been disappointed that support for NATO has not led to greater economic linkages between Europe and Canada. After all, Article 2 of the NATO Treaty was incorporated because of Canada's insistence that economic ties were as important a part of collective security as defence ties. But Trudeau, pursuing a "Third Option" to reduce economic dependence on the United States, found he could not achieve a so-called "contractual link" with the European Economic Community while simultaneously trying to reduce defence commitments to Europe. The conventional wisdom regarding the Leopard deal has been that Trudeau was forced to retreat from his policies in the face of determined opposition from European allies who were quite prepared to link their defence needs to Canada's economic ambitions. Schmidt is even rumoured to have bluntly told Trudeau, "No tanks, no trade" (p. 105). However, Maas convincingly argues that European economic linkages were more implicit than explicit, and though they clearly influenced the decision on tanks, it was not quite the case of extortion as has been claimed.

⁵ Head's relating of a comment Schmidt made to Trudeau, as quoted in Maas from Ivan Head and Pierre Trudeau, *The Canadian Way: Shaping Canada's Foreign Policy 1968-1984* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1995), 273-4.

Canada faced a somewhat similar situation in the 2000s when its Leopards were reaching the end of their service lives. However, the Army, no longer committed to Europe since withdrawal of the Brigade in 1994, now argued that they did not need a tank given the changed nature of combat in the twenty-first century. The Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien agreed to purchase the American Stryker DFSV instead, itself derived from the Canadian LAV III family of wheeled light armoured vehicles. However, combat experience in Afghanistan, where Leopards were deployed in support of Canadian troops (with debateable results), convinced the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper—spearheaded by a former tank commander Defence Minister supported by armoured elements of the Army—that the tank still had a role to play on a counterinsurgency battlefield. The DFSV idea was shelved, and after a procurement process conducted at a speed unheard of by Canadian standards, a replacement tank was selected and delivered. The tank chosen: the German Leopard 2.⁶

RUSSELL ISINGER, *UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN*

⁶ The Leopard 2 procurement decision is also worthy of academic attention. For one point of view on the acquisition, see Michael Byers and Stuart Webb, *Stuck in a Rut: Harper Government Overrides Military, Insists on Buying Outdated Equipment* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives/Rideau Institute, 2013), https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2013/09/Stuck_in_a_Rut.pdf.