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Urgent military aircraft procurement blindsided by shameless self-interest

It is bad enough that the long-suffering Canadian Forces thought they had to wait until June for the first delivery of badly needed C-17 strategic and tactical aircraft to help them fight the war on terror.

But, now the C-17 acquirement has become a tug-of-war between politicians seduced by its economic regional benefits as opposed to their responding to an urgent need for strategic airlift in Canada's national and international interests.

To be sure, this argument risks opening a Pandora's Box of controversy over competing regional interests versus the Canadian military's overseas combat mission, but that doesn't mean they are above examination and/or criticism.

The issue involves National Defence plans to spend \$3.4 billion to acquire four giant U.S. Boeing C-17 Globemaster strategic/cargo aircraft capable of transporting heavy armoured vehicles, such as Canadian Leopard tanks, to combat zones.

In terms of their need, an absence of such strategic lift last year resulted in the Forces spending about \$1 million per tank to fly 15 Leopards 10,000 kilometres on a leased Antonov to Kyrgyzstan, where they were transferred to American C-17s for the remainder of the flight to Afghanistan.

Beyond that immediate need, Canadian C-17s could meet a NATO-wide requirement for strategic transport aircraft which would enable NATO's Response Force to reach full operational capability in the global war on terror and in the delivery of humanitarian relief.

Instead of an orderly progression since the June 2006 announcement, however, the C-17 acquisition has become mired in shameless political jockeying.

It began with Public Works Minister Michael Fortier, who wants most of the C-17s' economic benefits to flow to Quebec where 55 to 60 per cent of Canada's aerospace industry is based.

To win the C-17 contract, Boeing is obliged to purchase its equivalent \$3.4 billion value in Canada on supplies and services, either for the C-17 or any other aircraft it makes.

Boeing had planned to spend about 30 per cent of the benefits in Quebec, 30 per cent in Ontario and some 20 per cent in Western Canada.

It would have been easy to single out Fortier, an appointed senator, as a naked political opportunist who wants Boeing to spend at least 40 per cent in Quebec. It just so happens that Fortier plans to run for a Tory seat in Montreal where much of the province's aerospace industry is based.

That was before Foreign Minister Peter MacKay bellied up to the trough and Manitoba Premier Gary Doer entered the fray.

MacKay, minister responsible for the Atlantic provinces, claims that Atlantic Canada has been shortchanged with Boeing's spending there earmarked for less than 10 per cent of the contract's worth.

Doer – mindful of the fact that a Manitoba firm lost the 1986 contract to maintain CF-18 fighter jets to a Montreal company, even though the Manitoba firm's bid was lower and technically superior – says the C-17 contract should be based on merit, which is true.

Canadians have seen this kind of political interference in the awarding of military contracts before, but that doesn't make it right.

The most egregious example, surely, is the Canadian-made Ross Rifle Canadians took to Europe during the First World War. It had the political support of Prime Minister Robert Borden and his Defence Minister Col. Sam Hughes over its military detractors who, it was proved, were right about the rifles' unsuitability during close contact with the enemy or in inclement weather.

A more recent example is the sordid saga of the 1960's-vintage Sea King helicopter replacement.

After a long search, the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney ordered 50 EH-101 helicopters at a cost of \$4.8 billion to replace them in 1992, but with a short-sighted snap of his finger in 1993, newly-elected Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien cancelled the order at a cost of \$500 million in cancellation fees.

It took more than 11 years to find a badly-needed replacement for the Sea Kings – 28 Sikorski CH-148 Cyclones at a combined cost of \$5 billion – the first one of which won't be delivered until November 2008. In the meantime, the government announced in 2005 it would spend \$19.4 million on the Sea King engines to keep the helicopters from falling out of the sky until March 2009.

The Canadian Forces need the C-17s' strategic lift urgently, still we are: heading into the new millennium - fighting a war on terror against enemies using unconventional tactics the likes of which haven't been seen on a mass scale before – watching an inbred, selfish, regional catfight over its economic spoils.

The Harper government's first priority ought to be giving the men and women the equipment they need in a timely fashion to fight that war and to properly reinforce them as required.

Instead, we are saddled with pork-barrel 20th-century political thinking that threatens the C-17s' timely acquisition, its use in Afghanistan and its contribution to NATO's humanitarian relief and the global war on terror.

How typically, yet how sadly, Canadian.

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