

The good news about the Canadian Forces Canada Command bad news

The good thing about a grim evaluation of Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier's plans to modernize the command of Canada's military is that he asked for it.

Otherwise, the news that the demands of Afghanistan are bleeding the Canadian Forces dry is disturbing given the numerous security threats facing Canada domestically and abroad.

The bleak assessment came from three retired generals Gen. Hillier commissioned to assess Canada Command, created July 1, 2005, – in the words of the Canadian Forces – “to bring the best available military resources to bear on a crisis or threat, wherever it occurs, nation wide.” It was said that for the first time there would be a unified and integrated chain of command at the national and regional levels with the immediate authority to deploy navy, army and air force assets in joint responses to crises or threats.

The key words in all of that are: “the best available military resources.”

Skeptics rightly thought when Canada Command was announced that, if there were no available military resources, the new command structure would be no better able to respond to threats than the previous structure.

For example, one of the biggest threats facing the Commander of Joint Task Force Pacific, whose command takes in the whole of British Columbia, is a catastrophic earthquake.

There is a serious military resource problem in B.C. thanks to the short-sighted shutdown of CFB Chilliwack and the move of its 1 Combat Engineer Regiment to CFB Edmonton by Jean Chrétien's Liberal government in the 1990s.

The Canadian Forces opposed that move because they feared the prospect of having military engineers responding to a catastrophic earthquake in B.C. with heavy equipment through a mountain range where bridges had collapsed into gorges and valleys.

Apart from a potential humanitarian crisis in a densely-populated city like Vancouver, think of the potential long-term economic costs of, say, the destruction of \$60 million in new Canadian National Railway lines and upgrades being built to the new \$200-million container port at remote Prince Rupert, 770 kilometres north of Vancouver.

Poised for prosperity, Prince Rupert – on Kailen Island and linked to the B.C. mainland by a bridge – will be the newest sea transportation link between North America and China, relieving the container port congestion from San Diego to Vancouver.

Now think of rail lines and bridges collapsed by an earthquake.

This is not Chicken Little crying that the sky is falling.

Tremors recorded by scientists on Canada's west coast earlier this year sparked fears among them that a catastrophic earthquake could hit B.C. within two years.

It is in Canada's national interest that the Canadian Forces be able to respond to such an anticipated natural disaster, but without the necessary military resources – which is precisely the case in B.C. – the Canada Command structure, which is supposed to streamline military operations, amounts to a hill of beans.

There is more: prosperity will also bring inevitable new security threats, including terrorism and trans-national crime, to which ports are inherently vulnerable.

In fairness the report, leaked to the news media, also indicated that Canada Command has reportedly conducted some 40, mostly-little-known and a few high-profile, exercises.

Among the high-profile exercises was Operation Lancaster in the Eastern Arctic on August 12-24, 2006, which included the North, East and Atlantic Joint Task Forces in concert with the RCMP, Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Coast Guard.

More recently, Operation Nanook 07 in Iqaluit and in the Baffin Island Coast and Hudson Strait areas on August 7 to 17 exercised army, navy and air force elements responding to an RCMP request for assistance in drug interdiction and a Coast Guard request for help with an environmental crisis.

Then, there was the low-profile Canadian component in Exercise Ardent Sentry/Northern Edge on April 30 to May 17, in which the only Canadian involvement was HMCS Vancouver's participation in a U.S. Surface Action Group off the Alaskan coast.

Still, the three generals reportedly painted a troubling picture of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM) element of Canada Command effectively managing the Afghan mission, but able to do little else.

Falling by the wayside were CEFCOM's global environment scanning, contingency planning, strategic-partner-engaging and shaping, synchronizing and operational-capability-sustaining roles.

CEFCOM staff reportedly said they had little or no time to think about doctrine, policies, processes and procedures.

Believe it.

There is not one Canadian Forces member involved in or supporting Canada's combat and reconstruction mission in Afghanistan who isn't close to running on empty.

The marvel is how they still do it.

Gen. Hillier is to be commended for not merely asking about Canada Command's successes, but inviting expert, honest criticism of its failures.

As always, taking a hard look at problems is the best way to work on their solutions.

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