



Tories and Grits are as one on defence policy

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Critics were quick to jump on the Harper government when it announced a sole-source contract to buy 65 F-35 fighter jets from Lockheed Martin. Chief among their laments were the cost, the government's decision to forgo a competitive process, and the lack of clear articulation of why Canada needs these new planes. In deflecting these criticisms, Defence Minister Peter McKay argued that the F-35 is the ideal platform for the air force and that the government acted quickly to ensure that Canadian industry reaped the most benefits from the multicountry program. It was also suggested that the F-35s are necessary to protect Canada's sovereignty, particularly in the Arctic.

While both sides have a case to make with respect to the procurement costs and industrial benefits, the sovereignty question sidesteps the larger issue behind this purchase. Although the F-35's ability to defend Canadian airspace was surely taken into account, that is not what makes this plane especially attractive to the government and the air force. The value of the F-35 is that it will permit Canada to take part in multinational air operations overseas for decades to come. Put simply, in buying these aircraft, the government will ensure that Canada can play a visible role in future allied air campaigns across the world.

In fact, if the Liberals eventually form a government, it's this aspect of the F-35 that is likely to persuade them to go through with the purchase, however grudgingly. Despite some divisions within the Liberal caucus, the party is largely united behind the idea that Canada must continue to play an active role in the world. And while the Liberals' international policy strategy emphasizes diplomacy and development over defence, once in office, they will acknowledge that the Canadian Forces offer them a useful means of playing "a role of pride and influence" in global affairs. Whether in Africa, South America, Asia or the Middle East, there will be a demand for Canadian military forces, and a Liberal government will be as eager to meet it as a Conservative one.

Behind the F-35 and other recently announced procurements, such as the joint support ships, there's a another story: the endurance of a consensus between the Liberals and the Conservatives about the general direction of Canada's defence policy. The two parties will spar over acquisition costs, end dates and who supports the troops more. They also may disagree over embracing the "responsibility to protect," robust United Nations peacekeeping operations or contributing to NATO missions. But, in the end, both the Liberals and the Conservatives want to deploy Canada's military on meaningful, internationally recognized missions overseas, an objective that requires continued investment in technologically advanced, combat-capable forces.

Both parties think the military should "do good" around the globe, and their views about what this involves are closer than they may be willing to admit. To be blunt, neither party believes that the Canadian Forces should prioritize the defence of Canada or North America. Such an approach would be inconsistent with how they understand international affairs and, most important, Canadian pride and prestige.

Admittedly, this defence policy consensus may surprise some observers. The war in Afghanistan is increasingly unpopular with Canadians, suggesting that a promise to keep Canada out of future conflicts of this type would find favour with a sizable segment of the public. Negative reactions to the F-35 purchase, moreover, indicate that many Canadians are wary of spending the money required to keep the military equipped for expeditionary operations that involve the threat of force and interoperability with key allies such as the United States, Britain and France. Within the two major parties, however, the desire to earn the respect of NATO allies probably will trump these domestic considerations.

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