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by Charlotte Duval-Lantoiné
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a profound international effect, pushing Western militaries, the Canadian Armed Forces included, to rethink their missions and position in the world. Personnel are at the core of armed forces' success and this rethinking of the CAF cannot exclude its members. Personnel management is all the more important as Canada's military has had to deal with compounded crises: one of recruitment and retention aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of culture, which resurfaced through sexual misconduct scandals involving some of the CAF's most senior leaders.

Cognizant of how much the world and social circumstances have changed, many have [argued](#) that the current defence policy, [Strong, Secure, Engaged](#) (SSE) needed revisions. For this reason, [Budget 2022](#) promised a defence policy review, one that would steer the CAF towards operational effectiveness for the plethora of security challenges characterizing the 21st century.

The validity of such a policy review is under debate, but this piece argues that the CAF would benefit from one in terms of its personnel management. Since SSE's publication in 2017, Operation Honour has faced its [demise](#), job dissatisfaction in the ranks is [high](#) and it is clear that the CAF will not be able to meet its [diversity targets](#) set for 2026. Added to those issues are a CAF that is overstretched and understaffed (by at least [7,500 people](#), according to Chief of the Defence Staff Wayne Eyre) and [costs of living](#) are once more becoming an issue in the ranks. While it is an ambitious policy that claims to put personnel first, SSE has gaps that a policy review needs to address sooner rather than later.

Strong, Secure, Engaged: The Broad Strokes

The topic of personnel management is SSE's first chapter. Titled "Well-Supported, Diverse, Resilient People and Family," this chapter acknowledges the complexity of personnel issues. The policy seeks to address recruitment, training and retention; job satisfaction, benefits and compensation; wellness and mental health; sexual misconduct; diversity; and military-to-civilian transition.

To tackle concerns and fulfil objectives such as "ensur[ing] effective recruitment, training and retention" and "fully leverag[ing] Canada's diversity," SSE offers some solid initiatives. However, the objectives are vague and there is no outline for potential measurement. Some of the initiatives are concrete, such as diversity targets, a goal for growth in the ranks, the appointment of a diversity champion, the creation of the CAF Transition Group or tax relief for deployed personnel under the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Other initiatives are the promise of human resource and retention strategies. Most of them have yet to see the light of day, according to the [2020-21 Departmental Results Report](#).



Another limitation of the SSE's personnel chapter is that the initiatives it presents seem to stand on their own, without much connection to one another. These initiatives are top-down, centred on National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) as the authority for implementation.

The culmination of Operation Honour and the 2021 scandals, the recruitment and retention issues and high level of dissatisfaction among the ranks, among other concerns, require a more holistic approach to personnel management, one that better bridges the overlap between concerns and are mission specific.

Defence Policy Review: Rethinking People First, Mission Always

A defence policy review does not need to overhaul the objectives and ideas outlined in SSE to have the intended effects. Some of the disruptions this could cause might override the benefits of such an approach. Encouragingly, Anita Anand [announced](#) on May 10, 2022 that DND is taking the direction of an update, which will ensure a certain level of continuity.

However, the personnel file has yet to get the level of prioritization required to ensure the CAF and its members can adequately respond to the threat environment. The problem is not new – the latest report on discrimination in the Department of National Defence (DND) and the CAF [observed](#) that the defence team has yet to implement the majority of two decades worth of personnel-related recommendations. It is an issue of leadership buy-in, based on a misunderstanding of the objectives and impact of personnel and diversity policies on the CAF. Retired general officers have suggested [combat readiness](#) needs to be prioritized over culture change, overlooking that putting mechanisms in place to prevent any form of misconduct, as well as to improve job satisfaction and morale, could go a long way toward enhancing the CAF's operational effectiveness.

So, how can we get that buy-in and institution-wide prioritization? Rethink what “people first, mission always” means, and make personnel considerations systematically integral to planning related to the CAF's core missions.

For example, the defence policy review [is expected](#) to expand the core mission that continental defence includes NORAD modernization – and Budget 2022 [reflects](#) this renewed priority. In this case, integrating personnel to this mission means outlining what needs to be done on the personnel management side for mission success. Considerations should include:

- What skills and type of personnel (from non-commissioned to officers, regular force or reserves) are needed in the policy and procurement agencies;
- Which people need to be deployed to operations related to North American defence and what they need in terms of equipment and training to fulfil this mission well;
- The career progression objectives that relate to this core mission;



- How to ensure continuity as individuals change postings;
- How to better support families as they relocate to the U.S. or as a member is deployed on operations, taking into account service couples, recruitment and the burden on the different occupations and environment.

The personnel-related requirements will be highly different for other core missions, such as “provid[ing] assistance to civil authorities and non-governmental partners in responding to international and domestic disasters or major emergencies.”

The same should go for culture change. Instead of viewing it as a pursuit that occurs in isolation from the CAF’s core mission, it would be useful for the defence policy review to look at how the demands for culture change – as currently spearheaded by the Chief Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC), the Chief of Military Personnel and the Judge Advocate General will impact the core missions. For example, a review must examine how enhanced harassment training should fit with other training and how culture change-related work should compare to the objectives of the core mission.

Second, the defence policy review should examine ways to ensure some continuity with the initiatives outlined in SSE. The latter promises several initiatives in terms of compensation and fair benefits: modernizing the honours and awards system, a “Comprehensive Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy” and a “strategy for human resources”), plus continuing to implement an already extant strategy, the Diversity Program and Action Plan.

We have yet to see some of those initiatives come to fruition, i.e., the [CAF Retention Strategy](#); others have just come out, such as the [Total Health and Wellness Strategy](#) (launched in April 2022). In the meantime, the [Path to Dignity and Respect](#) (the culture change strategy) was released in November 2020, the [Declaration of Victims’ Rights](#) is about to be implemented, the [report on systemic racism](#) came out on April 25 and the minister of National Defence received the results of the [Arbour review](#) on May 20.

It is common for the CAF to abandon or rewrite strategies: a new version of the [Diversity Strategy](#), first initiated in 2018, is in the [works](#). Operation Honour has seen a high turnover of initiatives,¹ and the *Path to Dignity and Respect*, while having been published recently, appears to stand outside the culture change initiatives currently under way. In fact, CPCC announced in a recent briefing that the *Path* will not be used to implement culture change.² Those strategies may miss certain aspects of military life that affect personnel, but not implementing them might hinder progress in more substantial ways. Rewriting strategies is not necessarily the best approach if they do not bear the expected results. Monitoring at all levels in order to identify unintended

¹ Allan English, “‘Comprehensive Culture Change’ and Diversity in the Canadian Armed Forces: An Assessment of Operation Honour after Three Years and Implications for the Latest CAF ‘Diversity Strategy,’” Paper presented at the IUS Canada Conference, Ottawa, October 2018.

² Author’s own observation from attending external stakeholder briefings organized by the Department of National Defence. The announcement that CPCC would not implement the *Path* took place on May 12, 2022.



consequences and successes and allow for change of course on a more case-by-case basis will go a long way to ensure progress and change without disrupting processes.

Third, it is imperative for the defence policy update to communicate that personnel policy is not a series of initiatives that Military Personnel Command and different agencies within environmental (i.e., air force, army, navy) headquarters need to undertake, but rather a complex, ambiguous and interconnected series of issues that impact every aspect of military life for service members, their families and the civilians who constitute the defence team.

This can be done in several ways. The defence policy review can establish a system that allows for constant dialogue vertically (both top down and bottom up) and horizontally (across units, occupations, environments, regular forces to the reserves and vice-versa). This would help identify problems at the source, foster the sharing of best practices and allow for the fine-tuning of policies to better account for the needs of different occupations, ranks and subcultures in the CAF (and based on the different core missions the CAF is involved in).

Working from the ground up, from the objectives to the solution, can also be useful. This approach would require the CAF to set objectives that have a clear, measurable end goal and identify the problems that make these objectives necessary. If some issues overlap, they should be examined for how and why they do. The dynamics that contribute to issues should be looked at based on the plethora of research conducted by [Defence Research and Development](#) Canada and the [Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis](#). This approach would determine if some of those barriers impact certain sections of the CAF differently (based on rank, occupation, environment, gender) by conducting a broad [gender-based analysis plus](#), and devise plans accordingly, cognizant of the interconnections established. Then, to ensure the devised policies have the intended effect, they should be closely monitored based on the above approach.

Conclusion

The past two years have created a need for a defence policy review that makes personnel issues an integral part of the implementation of the CAF's core missions. While the ideas listed above could provide a roadmap for rethinking how personnel management is done within DND/CAF, it is a lot to ask for a defence policy review. The purpose of defence policies is more about expressing government intent and commitment to certain issues, and less about giving the CAF a detailed roadmap on how to manage its activities from the top down. Also, expecting the CAF to get all the complexities of personnel management right is unrealistic, especially given how understaffed and overstretched it is.

However, at a time when the CAF has [acknowledged](#) being under existential threat and in need of a culture change, the defence policy can harness the momentum already in place to offer clear direction for the CAF. The [revised ethos](#), the [Directives on Inclusive Behaviour](#), the Total Health and Wellness Strategy, the upcoming Reconstitution Plan and the Arbour review signal that the



moment is here for the DND and the CAF to rethink what “people first, mission always” practically means in an environment where attrition is high and recruitment is low.

Integrating a holistic personnel strategy that looks at all aspects of the military human resources management at the centre of the CAF’s core missions can help seize this moment and offer CAF members, their families and the civilian members of the defence team the stability and direction they need for mission success.

► About the Author

Charlotte Duval-Lantoiné is the Ottawa operations manager and a fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. She completed a master's in military history at Queen's University, during which she started researching the toxic culture of leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces during the 1990s and its impact on gender integration, which had begun in 1989. She continues to study leadership and culture change issues in the military in her free time. She obtained her BA in history and political science at McGill University in 2017.

Charlotte is author of [The Ones We Let Down: Toxic Leadership Culture and Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces](#), in which looks at failed efforts to achieve gender integration “in full” during the 1990s. She reveals an organization unwilling and unable to change, and attitudes held by military leaders that fed a destructive dynamic and cost lives.

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