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The Rise and Fall of Canadian Military Assistance in the Developing World, 1952-1971

Greg Donaghy

Since the end of the Second World War, military assistance has emerged as an important instrument of international diplomacy. Initially employed by the United States in Europe, Latin America and Asia for a variety of economic and political reasons in the mid-1940s, by the end of the decade American military assistance had been fashioned into a coherent program “whose principal goal was the containment of Communist expansion.”¹ By the mid-1950s, both the Soviet Union and Communist China had responded with their own assistance programs designed to woo the developing states of Asia and Africa.² As Britain and France dissolved their colonial empires in the late 1950s, they too chose military aid as an effective way to maintain their links with the post-colonial state and to demonstrate their continued capacity to pursue independent global initiatives.³ Other states were also attracted by this kind of aid. West Germany, for example, began distributing military assistance in 1960 as part of its efforts to garner international support for its claim to sovereignty.⁴

Canada’s decision to supply small amounts of military assistance to the developing world owed relatively little to the cold war calculations of the superpowers and the considerations of national prestige that motivated other donors. Though Canadian diplomats recognized the benefits that military assistance might bring to the western world in the early 1950s, they were not especially anxious to divert scarce resources away from Europe towards the handful of small African and Asian states requesting aid. This was

particularly true when any Canadian venture was likely to duplicate Washington’s substantial efforts to secure regional allies with promises of military assistance. As a consequence, the Department of External Affairs wasted little time and effort in convincing a reluctant Department of National Defence to accept military assistance as part of its mandate.

By the late 1950s, however, decolonization had begun to alter the relatively stable postwar international system. Disturbances in Burma and the collapse of internal order in the former Belgian colony of the Congo brought the importance of military assistance into sharp focus. These developments underlined the danger that an inadequately trained military posed to national and international stability. Increasingly, officials in the Department of External Affairs saw military assistance as an important means of contributing to the maintenance of order in the developing world. Consequently, in 1958 they began to press the Department of National Defence for a change in Canadian policy.

The success of the East Block (referring to External Affairs, their location on Parliament Hill in Ottawa) in changing that policy in the early 1960s depended on a number of factors. Both Diefenbaker and Pearson used military assistance to build personal relationships with new Commonwealth leaders and lent their considerable weight to the department’s cause. At the same time, the dynamics of the inter-departmental debate slowly changed in Canada

as the country's defence budget contracted in the early 1960s. As these budgetary reductions deprived Canadian industry of its domestic market, the Department of Defence Production became a vocal, and influential, proponent of military assistance. The same budget reductions also encouraged a more forthcoming attitude in the Department of National Defence, which could ill-afford to stand aside while other departments dipped into its training budget for their own purposes. With the support of the Chiefs of Staff, Canadian military assistance blossomed during the mid-1960s. At the same time, however, the conflict in Vietnam raised concern among a new generation of Canadian politicians about the dangers implicit in any overseas military commitment. As a result, the program was exposed to attack when the Trudeau government began to adjust its fiscal, military and foreign policies during its first term in office.

Canadian policy-makers were first forced to confront the problem of military assistance in the early 1950s, when 'New Commonwealth' countries like India and Pakistan (as well as the occasional South American republic) approached Ottawa for help. Though inclined to respond positively to these requests, officials in the Department of External Affairs advanced their case in careful and cautious terms. In one of the earliest efforts to articulate a rationale for military assistance, Charles Ritchie, the deputy under-secretary of state, argued that such aid would serve primarily to increase Canada's heightened postwar international stature. A forthcoming response would also promote Canada's reputation as a proponent of a co-operative international order. Only with considerable diffidence did he suggest that military assistance might have any relevance to Canada's broader diplomatic objectives:

We should not lose sight of the fact that some of these requests come from parts of the world in which western policy is often suspect. Anything we can do, however small, to offset this suspicion is an aid to our associates in both NATO and the Commonwealth, and is in our long-term interest.⁵

It was not surprising that Ritchie chose to define the benefits of military assistance in such circumscribed and modest terms. The international system's rigid bi-polarity limited the

scope for an independent and effective contribution from a smaller country like Canada. Consequently, the Department of External Affairs was not inclined to spend much effort overcoming the doubts frequently expressed by the Department of National Defence.

Canada's defence authorities had good reason for their hostility to military assistance. The steady expansion of the Canadian armed forces in the early 1950s placed an almost intolerable strain on their training facilities. In 1951, this was exacerbated by the government's decision to train NATO air crew and pilots as part of Canada's mutual aid contribution.⁶ Complicating matters were the security issues that training non-NATO personnel increasingly raised. The Chiefs of Staff Committee was diligent in resisting the whole notion of military assistance. In the fall of 1953, it referred the problem to the Cabinet Defence Committee in a bid to end the East Block's half-hearted efforts to have the department accept foreign trainees. While agreeing that Canada ought to provide friendly non-NATO nationals with military training from time to time, the cabinet insisted that "where space was available... first priority should be given to Commonwealth and NATO Nationals."⁷

While the Department of National Defence enforced this policy vigorously for the rest of the decade – rejecting almost every request on the grounds of inadequate space – the rapid evolution of the cold war confrontation after 1954 rendered it vulnerable to criticism. After agreeing to the *de facto* partition of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference in July 1954, Moscow and Peking quickly abandoned their strategy of directly confronting the West in guerilla warfare. Instead, they encouraged the newly independent states of Africa and Asia to pursue neutrality and non-alignment.⁸ Almost immediately both communist states enjoyed some success. In April 1955, for example, China's foreign minister, Chou En-Lai, assumed a leading role at the Bandung Conference of Asian and African nations. By 1957, the Soviet Union had concluded economic assistance agreements with Egypt, India, Syria, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Burma, the Sudan and Yemen.⁹ In turn, the forward policy adopted by China and the USSR forced the major colonial powers, Britain and France, to hasten the dissolution of their respective empires.¹⁰

Both these developments were cause for increasing concern in Ottawa. In early 1956, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, warned that the Communist bloc's aggressive pursuit of allies in the developing world jeopardized Western influence in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.¹¹ Ottawa also feared that the accelerating pace of decolonization would create a host of weak and unviable states susceptible to "Communist infiltration."¹² At the official level, at least, these concerns created an outlook much more inclined to embrace military assistance as an instrument of Canadian diplomacy. In the spring of 1957, G.R. Heasman, Canada's Ambassador to Djakarta, found a receptive audience when he attacked a Department of National Defence decision to reject an Indonesian request for navigation training. Outlining Moscow's continuing efforts to court Indonesia, Heasman placed considerable emphasis on the important role military assistance might play in "keeping Indonesia in the Western camp."¹³

Though unable to convince General Charles Foulkes, Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, to meet the Indonesian request, the Department of External Affairs was no longer prepared to accept the present state of affairs.¹⁴ In November 1958, it seized upon a request from Burma to press home its point of view. The desire to help offset Soviet influence in Asia by securing the support of newly independent states like Burma for the West remained the most important justification for Canadian assistance. Increasingly, however, the department's case for military aid reflected its growing appreciation of the international implications of decolonization in Africa and Asia. The department contended that Canada had a strategic interest in promoting the stability of former colonies with uncertain and inexperienced central governments:

In addition to our desire to encourage Western ties with Burma, we have a further interest in assisting the Burmese to improve their defence forces in order to strengthen their position against external aggression and in the maintenance of internal security... [Burma] is faced with almost continuous rebellion on the part of the hill tribes and minority races, troubles with Communist Burmese rebels, depredations by Chinese Nationalist forces and finally incursions from Communist China. The internal stability of Burma depends to a

considerable extent on the Government's ability to keep dissident forces in check.¹⁵

Moreover, the department had begun to think that Canada, with its reputation for "genuine international cooperation," might be better qualified than some of the larger Western powers to undertake the delicate task of assisting the new nations of Asia and Africa develop the kind of all-purpose armed forces they required.¹⁶

The significance of developments in the colonial world was not entirely lost on the Department of National Defence. In some quarters, support for training assistance had already begun to emerge. The Chief of General Staff, for example, thought that the army could accommodate some requests for military training.¹⁷ The Director of the Regular Officer Training Plan agreed, noting the minister's interest in the subject and pointing out that it fell within the "[p]resent government policy ... [of] fostering closer ties with and between other members of the Commonwealth."¹⁸ Yet, Foulkes refused to bend and offered officials in the East Block no grounds for hoping that he would eventually adopt a more forthcoming attitude.¹⁹ For John Holmes, assistant under-secretary of state, and George Glazebrook, the head of Commonwealth Division, the conclusion was obvious: the Department of National Defence must be made to "accept as a new aspect of Canadian military policy the expansion of training facilities, just as they have come to accept truce commission work as a normal part of their activities."²⁰

The opportunity to tackle the Department of National Defence finally arrived in December 1960, when the prime minister of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, asked the Canadian prime minister, John Diefenbaker, to provide instructors and medical officers for the Ghanaian Armed Forces (GAF).²¹ Diefenbaker, who was committed to the co-operative ideals of the emerging Commonwealth, was inclined to grant the Ghanaian request.²² Following his meeting with Nkrumah at the 1961 Commonwealth prime ministers' conference, he instructed the Chiefs of Staff Committee to send an officer to West Africa to examine the situation.²³ For the moment at least, the prime minister's intervention muted



Captain John Hasek of the Black Watch of Canada carries out an inspection of officer cadets at the Ghanaian Military Academy. The Ghanaian Sergeant-Major accompanying Captain Hasek seems to be somewhat distracted by the unofficial parade in front of the cadets. (CFPU CEN 66-109-9)

opposition within the Department of National Defence to Canadian military assistance.

The East Block seized this opportunity to secure cabinet approval for a more generous military assistance policy. The increasingly frenzied pace of developments in Africa added a new sense of urgency to the department's efforts. The situation in the former Belgian colony of the Congo was particularly disturbing. Within two weeks of acquiring its independence in June 1960, the Congo erupted into a brutal and disastrous civil war that left over half the country without effective government by the end of the year. More ominously, the war threatened to bring the Soviet Union and the United States into direct conflict as neither power was prepared to accept a power vacuum in the middle of Africa.²⁴ To Canadian officials, who "very much hoped that Africa would not become and would not be regarded as another East-West political and propaganda battleground," the crisis in central

Africa underlined the importance of ensuring stability in former colonies.²⁵ Canadian military training assistance, argued the department in a submission to cabinet, represented a contribution to internal and international stability. For the first time, this was advanced as the primary rationale behind Canadian policy:

Such assistance would constitute a direct, although modest contribution to the establishment of efficient and stable military forces in friendly countries where armed forces are often the largest single group of disciplined and trained personnel, and usually a good influence for law and order. Local armed forces, if properly trained and led, can contribute to stability and the preservation of peace.²⁶

In addition, there remained as an important secondary objective the desire to discourage developing countries from accepting assistance from the Communist bloc:

The alternative to the provision of training assistance is not always the supply of such assistance by another western country. In some cases the countries we fail to assist may feel it necessary to turn to the Soviet bloc for a helping hand. Experience has shown that the Communist countries are always eager to take advantage of such opportunities whenever they are offered.

For good measure, the department added that personal contact between Canadians and foreign military personnel "would provide a wider understanding of Canada based on actual experience." Finally, there was also a need to demonstrate the benefits of continued membership in the Commonwealth to many of these countries.²⁷

The possibility raised by the Ghanaian request – that training assistance might be delivered abroad – provided the departments of External Affairs and National Defence with the slender basis necessary for a compromise. Overseas training would certainly meet Canada's political objectives as defined by officials in the East Block. At the same time, it would avoid some of the obstacles which were responsible for the Department of National Defence's earlier hesitations. There would no longer be fears that such training might impinge on prior commitments to Canadian and NATO training in Canadian facilities, or that it would jeopardize security on Canadian bases. In addition, Canadian instructors would be able to adjust their teaching methods to meet local language requirements and educational standards. Any extra costs associated with this kind of assistance, the two departments agreed, would normally be met by the recipient country. From now on, training in Canada would be offered only in the most exceptional circumstances and when all security, language and other requirements were met.²⁸ In June 1961, cabinet approved the conditions under which the two departments agreed that Canada would henceforth "accept as part of its defence commitments the training, if and when requested, of military personnel of Commonwealth countries."²⁹

Despite the compromise endorsed by cabinet, doubts about the value of military assistance soon re-surfaced in the Department of National Defence. The Department's response a few

months later to a Nigerian request for training assistance, for example, seemed designed to forestall any attempt to saddle it with a large military aid program. The Nigerian request was substantial: Lagos asked for 30 officer cadet training places in Canada and for Canadian instructors for its military academy.³⁰ Informally, Nigeria also asked for help in developing its own air force. The level of assistance eventually proposed by the Department of National Defence was disappointingly small. It agreed to make available places for Nigerian cadets within existing army, navy and air force training facilities but declined to dispatch a training team to Nigeria and ignored completely the request for air force help.³¹

In the East Block this attitude raised two disturbing considerations. First, the Department of National Defence was abandoning a possible market for Canadian aircraft by refusing to address the needs of the Nigerian air force. Second, and far more important, the department's limited program jeopardized at least part of the rationale behind Canadian military assistance:

Canada has sent a full training team to Ghana, a neighbouring but smaller Commonwealth country, whose government follows a neutralist and occasionally anti-Western foreign policy. We believe that from a purely political point of view, it would be inadvisable to come up with a significantly smaller proposal to the Nigerians who follow a generally friendly line.³²

Howard Green, the secretary of state for external affairs, suggested instead that Ottawa send an officer to Nigeria to explore how Canada might provide some help. The minister of national defence refused to be drawn and rejected further suggestions from his colleague that Canada should explore a possible contribution to the Nigerian air force and that Canada should agree to pay half the cost of training the Nigerian cadets.³³ Cabinet, alive to the consequences of appearing to favour Ghana over its west African neighbour, sided with Green and agreed that Canada would train 32 Nigerian cadets and would absorb over half the estimated cost of \$275,000. Further, Canada would provide a Commandant and a Director of Studies for a military academy as well as a six-man naval training team. Altogether, the program would cost Canada

approximately \$250,000, roughly the amount being spent on the program in Ghana.³⁴

This was not quite the victory desired by the Department of External Affairs. It pegged Canada's military assistance at a fairly low level and failed completely to deal with the informal Nigerian request for help in setting up their air force. The refusal to exert a greater effort in Nigeria, which left the Department of External Affairs reluctant to meet several new Ghanaian requests for fear of upsetting the balance of Canadian efforts in West Africa, disturbed officials in the East Block.³⁵ The whole question of military assistance clearly needed to be re-visited by the two departments. A request in the spring of 1963 for instructors and equipment to set up a joint air force school for the three East African Commonwealth countries of Uganda, Kenya and

Tanganyika seemed likely to provide the ideal opportunity for a wide-ranging inter-departmental discussion.³⁶

This discussion, however, was a long time coming. The Tanganyikan request, which was first forwarded to the Department of National Defence in early April 1963, was quickly shunted aside by the new Minister of National Defence, Paul Hellyer.³⁷ Intent on re-organizing the Canadian military, Hellyer refused to undertake any further commitments until the process was finished.³⁸ Over the next few months, the Department of External Affairs became increasingly distressed at Canada's inability to respond to requests for assistance from such countries as Ghana, Malaysia and the West Indies. The Tanganyikan request for assistance, however, remained particularly frustrating. In part, this was due to

A Canadian instructor, Captain John Sharp, watches mortar instruction at the Ghanaian Army Training School, December 1966. (CFPU CEN 66-109-50)



Prime Minister L.B. Pearson's promise of aid which he gave to the Tanganyikan prime minister, Julius Nyerere, during the latter's visit to Ottawa in July 1963. Tanganyikan defence authorities were not the least bit shy about recalling the prime minister's commitment whenever military assistance was discussed with the Canadian High Commission.³⁹ The department was also growing concerned that Tanganyika might turn to Communist sources for its aid.⁴⁰ Before Ottawa could resolve the question of aid to Tanganyika, the context in which military assistance was considered changed dramatically. The catalyst was West Germany's decision to help Dar-es-Salaam develop a small air force by providing a training team and a handful of aircraft.⁴¹

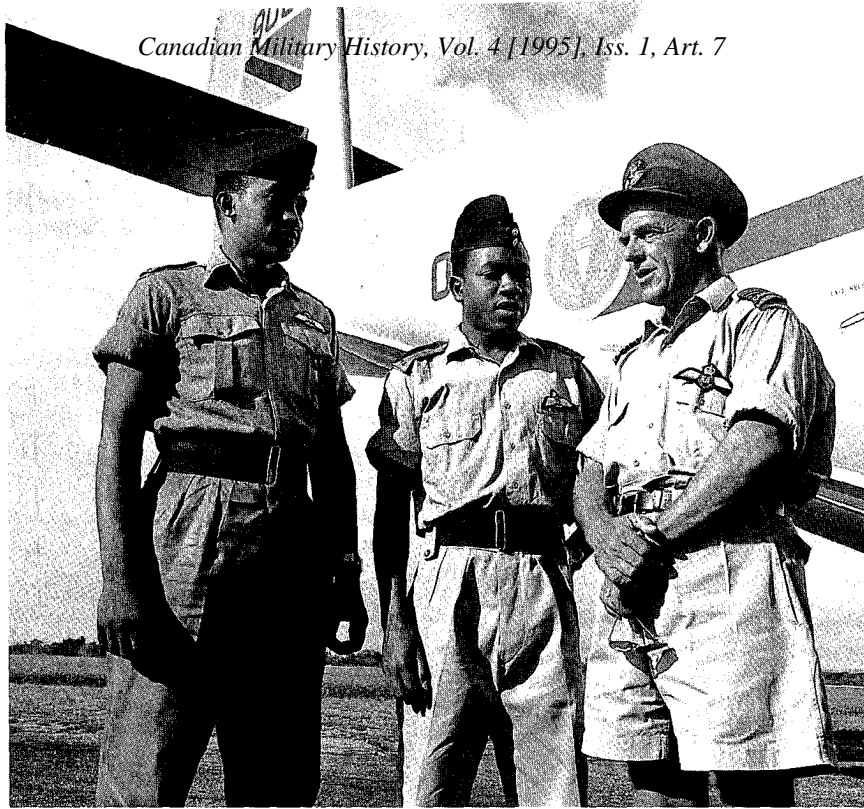
In Ottawa, the Department of Defence Production reacted with alarm at the West German decision. C.M. Drury, its minister, had already expressed his concern at Canada's failure to assist Nigeria with its air force and had been brushed aside by Hellyer.⁴² Drury now angrily insisted that something be done to avoid the fumbling that characterized Canada's efforts to respond to the Nigerian and Tanganyikan requests for air force assistance. Canada was clearly in danger of losing substantial markets for its aircraft and needed to develop a more cogent policy on military assistance.⁴³ This time, the Department of National Defence was ready to oblige. During the preceding year, the department had grudgingly come to conclude that its unsuccessful opposition to military assistance threatened its ability to influence the nature of Canadian military aid while leaving it responsible for all of the costs. Clearly, it made more sense to establish a comprehensive program with its own establishment and its own budget over which the department could exercise some control.⁴⁴

Officials in the Department of External Affairs happily embraced their new allies. During June and July 1964, they met frequently with their colleagues from the departments of Finance, Defence Production and National Defence to consider how more adequate machinery might be developed. At the official level it was agreed quickly that both new procedures and new funds would be required to deal with the problems plaguing military assistance. Though they remained uncertain which department would administer these funds, officials were united on

the size and nature of Canadian military assistance. Finance, External Affairs and National Defence moved quickly to ensure that commercial considerations, despite their role in sparking this re-consideration of Canadian policy, supplied very little of the official rationale for a continuing program of Canadian military assistance.⁴⁵ Instead, military assistance was treated as an adjunct to Canada's general aid policy. Its foremost purpose was to help recipient governments maintain the internal stability necessary for political, social and economic growth. Naturally enough, officials tended to see Communist bloc aid as inherently destabilizing. Hence, the program had a second objective: it was to discourage recipient countries from accepting military help from the Communist bloc. Military assistance was also intended to strengthen Canadian and Western influence.

In order to determine whether specific requests appeared likely to meet these goals, this ad hoc group of officials proposed that cabinet establish an interdepartmental Military Assistance Committee. Composed of representatives from four departments – External Affairs, Finance, National Defence and Defence Production – the committee would submit its recommendations to the Cabinet Committee on External Affairs and Defence for approval. In addition, they proposed endowing Canada's new military assistance program with a \$5 million budget, a figure which was to account for whatever aid cabinet eventually decided to send to Tanzania and Malaysia. In separate memoranda, cabinet was also urged to send survey missions to these two countries to explore their long-standing requests for aid.

In August 1964, cabinet considered the recommendations proposing a general program of military assistance and the problem posed by Tanzania and Malaysia. Several ministers questioned the proposed scale of Canadian aid. The minister of national defence, though he generally approved of the recommendations, worried that the provision of aid might "involve us in commitments for the security of these countries which would be inappropriate for Canada and might better be undertaken by other western powers."⁴⁶ The prime minister, in particular, worried about the dangers involved in assisting developing nations build up their



Flight Lieutenant K.R. Johnson of the RCAF briefs two Tanzanian pilots prior to an operational flight at Dar-es-Salaam. The aircraft in the background is a de Havilland Canada Caribou. (CFPU CEN 66-109-15)

military forces. He clearly considered military assistance too sensitive a subject to be left solely in the hands of the bureaucracy. Instead, he suggested that cabinet examine "each future proposal...singly and on its merits."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Pearson and his colleagues endorsed the arguments in favour of a more dynamic military assistance program, instructed their officials to establish the proposed inter-departmental Military Assistance Committee, and despatched survey teams to Asia and Africa.

Despite its reluctance to establish a continuing program of military assistance, cabinet's decisions seemed clearly headed in that direction. In December 1964, upon receipt of the survey mission's report, cabinet agreed to send a training mission to Tanzania and to accept Tanzanian officer cadets. Intended to operate for five years, the Tanzanian program was expected to cost over \$5 million. The following January, in response to a recommendation received from the Military Assistance Committee, cabinet agreed to spend over \$4 million assisting Malaysia during the next 27 months. Finally, in late February 1965, displeased that Dar-es-Salaam had decided to accept an East German consular representative, Bonn withdrew all its aid and Nyerere turned to Canada to fill the void. Quickly, cabinet agreed

that Canada would train and equip a small air force wing at a cost that approximated the \$9.2 million originally allotted the project by Bonn.

By now Canada was operating programs with a total cost of \$7,664,316 for the 1965-66 fiscal year.⁴⁸ In addition to the major programs involving Ghana, Nigeria, Malaysia and Tanzania, Canada had agreed to train a small number of officer cadets from Jamaica and Zambia. Early in the summer of 1965, the Department of External Affairs took steps to place the whole military assistance program on much firmer footing.⁴⁹ In addition to resolving a number of administrative irritants, the program changes sought from cabinet would significantly expand the Military Assistance Committee's terms of reference. Specifically, the committee would be given supervisory authority over the implementation of military assistance programs once they had been approved by Cabinet. This authority would allow the committee to adjust those programs so that the needs of recipient countries might be met better within the financial ceilings approved by Cabinet.

The proposed memorandum to cabinet also contained a more far-reaching proposal. The

Military Assistance Committee was to be authorized to approve without reference to ministers the provision of training assistance “which would not involve significant political considerations, numbers of trainees or total expenditure.” The proposed \$300,000 budget represented a significant increase over the approximately \$15,000 then being spent on equivalent short term aid provided to Zambia and Jamaica. Though several of its members expressed continued doubts about the value of military assistance, the Cabinet Committee on External Affairs and Defence approved these recommendations in February 1966.⁵⁰

With this decision, Canada’s military assistance program at last had all the elements of an established and coherent operation. For the first time, officials in the East Block could hope to respond quickly and efficiently to modest requests for specialized types of training. The Department of External Affairs, however, had no opportunity to build on this small victory and combine the discretionary spending program with the four larger programs into a fully-integrated military assistance scheme.⁵¹ With the election of the Trudeau government in June 1968, the officials responsible for military assistance found themselves increasingly preoccupied with the struggle to defend and justify other, more important, elements of Canadian defence policy.⁵² With little warning, in July 1969, Cabinet decided to phase out military assistance over a three year period beginning in fiscal year 1970-71.⁵³

Cabinet’s decision was taken within the context of a cost-cutting exercise and there is no reason to doubt the view that military assistance was primarily a victim of budgetary pressures. However, a glance at an attempt to reverse this decision the following year – a concerted effort by the Department of External Affairs, the Department of National Defence and the Department of Industry Trade and Commerce – reveals why military assistance was so vulnerable. This effort to revive the program was strongly opposed by a number of liberal-minded ministers. After a decade or more of military assistance programs, they argued with some justification, most recipient states had sufficient resources to preserve internal order. Canadian aid could be better spent on a variety of projects that met more basic human needs. In addition, as the last remnants of colonial order collapsed in Africa and

Asia, the possibility that Canada might find itself drawn into a Vietnam-like civil war was advanced as a reason for caution.⁵⁴ Such arguments helped erode support for military assistance at the political level. This was clearly reflected in the scale of the program cabinet agreed to revive: the \$500,000 budget allotted to the Military Training Assistance Program represented only one-sixth the average annual expenditure between 1961 and 1969. This program, which would provide training in Canadian facilities only, and specifically precluded the transfer of military equipment abroad, was much more modest in its expectations. Eschewing the larger strategic considerations that had motivated the Canadian program since the late 1950s, the new Military Training Assistance Program reflected the reduced Canadian commitment to internationalism that characterized Canadian foreign policy under Trudeau.

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47. L.D. Hudon, "Memorandum for Mr. A.W.F. Plumptre," 10 September 1964, RG 19, Vol 4929, File 1091-7-2, NAC; Confidential source.
48. Annex 1 to "Memorandum to Cabinet," 3 February 1966, DEA File 27-20-5.
49. Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chief of Defence Staff, 22 June 1965, DEA File 27-20-5.
50. L. Denis Hudon, "Memorandum for R.B. Bryce," 9 February 1966, RG 19, Vol 4929, File 8381-00(1), NAC.
51. H. Tellier to the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 24 January 1969; Michael Shenstone, Memorandum for H.B. Robinson, 8 April 1969 RG 24, Volume 21577, File 2-5040-12, NAC.
52. On the defence policy review, see Robert Bothwell and Jack Granatstein, *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
53. Record of Cabinet Decisions, Meetings of July 25, 28, 29 and 30, 1969, RG 19, Volume 4929, File 8381-00, NAC.
54. Confidential Source.

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