

Another Canadian foreign policy is possible: Alternatives to Harper's militarism

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The many Canadians who support our country's role as a peacemaker in the global community are likely to remain frustrated for the next four years. For the past two decades there has been an unheralded shift in emphasis towards war fighting and preparing for irregular war on an ongoing basis.

Given the ascendancy of militarism, it may now seem pointless to try to make the case for peace, the prevention of armed conflict and the protection of civilians. On the contrary, it is vital during these dark years that we keep these goals alive, and not succumb to the notion that it is a naïve and impossible dream.

Just as the Cold War was winding down, former Conservative Defence Minister Perrin Beattie introduced the "long war" policy. The objectives were three-fold: to expand the Canadian Forces, the defence-industrial base, and the "constituency of defence" so as to ready the nation for protracted conventional war. Naturally, expanding the defence constituency would also help to build a broader conservative constituency.

Redirecting this trajectory won't be easy. Understanding a few of the interests and connections in play is a first step. It is also important for people to recognize that there are credible alternatives, that we can offer an agenda for sustainable security.

Harper at war

The Harper Government is moving quickly to institutionalize its emphasis on war fighting. Major capital acquisition programs such as the stealth F-35 strike aircraft, new nuclear submarines, frigates and destroyers consolidate a weapons-driven defence policy. These are now among the most advanced platforms for fighting in the sort of great power war that no one survives. The total expense is likely to exceed \$100 billion, limiting capacity for other roles and imposing huge opportunity costs on the whole public sector.

Despite the absence of a direct military threat, Canada's defence budget nearly doubled over the past decade, reaching a new high of \$22.3 billion per year. With military spending projected to increase, the additional funding will have to be reallocated from social programs such as health care and education, leaving both less effective and less appealing to the point where they're easier to privatize. Larger military expenditures benefit Canada's 1 per cent while imposing high costs on the 99 per cent.

The unlimited liability and risks, which soldiers volunteer to accept in operations, are quietly being shifted toward Canadian families who didn't vote or volunteer to become more vulnerable. It shouldn't be any surprise that this government's response to increasing socio-economic desperation is to build more prisons -- another lucrative industry -- another example of private profit at public expense.

Most have heard Prime Minister Harper's mission to instill patriotism, aggressive nationalism, militarism and fear of a more dangerous world. Those who recall the Cold War and the day-to-day threat of thermo nuclear war may doubt the message. Yet these are longstanding tactics designed to alarm people into believing they'll have to sacrifice, as the ads suggest, to fight uncertainty, fight chaos, fight terrorists and pirates.

Ottawa is now focused on "perception management" -- "Pentagon-speak" for information control and deception -- at home and abroad. Canada's defence establishment has invested heavily in embedding journalists and opinion moulders, as well as in nurturing a dependent academic community. As a result, Canadians seldom hear constructive criticism of any military priority.

In short, Canadians now confront what U.S. President (General) Eisenhower warned of as the unwarranted influence of a military-industrial complex. His advice was just echoed by the Republican candidate Ron Paul: "Watch out for the military-industrial complex -- they always have an enemy. Nobody is going to invade us. We don't need any more [weapons systems]."

Yet with Canada and the U.S. sharing unparalleled economic and defence integration, we also share the side effects. Expanding our military-industrial complex is a central component of this government's plans for consolidating their Conservative revolution. The wider implications will be serious.

Restoring a peace agenda

It's already hard to believe that previous Canadian governments made war prevention a priority. Restoring Canada's reputation, not as an aggressive war-fighter, but as a champion of sustainable security, requires an agenda for peace.

After World War II, Canada had proven our capacity to fight and fight hard when absolutely necessary, but when faced with weapons of mass destruction and an increasingly interdependent world, there was near-consensus that we had to revise the system "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Faced with the risks of mutually assured destruction, Canada earned the reputation of an honest broker, a helpful fixer, a leader in peacekeeping, a respected proponent of human rights, international law and UN-centred multilateralism.

Those efforts stemmed from the notion that it's possible to improve attitudes and behaviour, as well as approaches and institutions, in the cause of developing a better world.

Canadians supported such idealism, particularly the focus on co-operation through the UN to avoid confrontation and avert conflict.

Usually in the aftermath of bad wars and genocides there is support for building or strengthening universal organizations to prevent such mistakes. But our elected officials express no interest in conflict prevention or developing a more effective United Nations. In recent years there has been little scope for idealism in Canadian politics. It's hastily dismissed as impractical, naïve and wimpy. Idealistic approaches require persistent leadership. Our government prefers aggressive quick fixes.

But idealism is far from dead, it is only faded. The more challenging universal projects of the past century have yet to be realized. Our officials became frustrated with the UN and jumped ship to NATO rather than empowering the UN to fulfill its assigned tasks. We still need to develop a global security system that could stem aggression, prompt disarmament and strengthen international law. We also need global norms to advance social justice, human rights and sustainable development, or at least apply the brakes to climate change and prepare for its impact.

Better approaches and institutions are possible at every level. There are practical security and defence options that are consistent with Canadian values and our global interests. Here are a few of the more promising ones for civil society and perhaps even a future government to consider.

Better approaches for peace and security

Promoting a global culture of peace would be a good start. The last 10 years had been proclaimed as the International Decade for a culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world. We might extend the deadline for another decade; lay out the organizing principals and chart steps to a safer future.

In June 1984, Pierre Trudeau established the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security (CIIPS), partially to ensure much-needed expertise and a broader menu of policy options. It was no secret that Trudeau wanted to offset our heavy reliance on analysis by the Pentagon and NATO. However, the Mulroney Conservatives cancelled CIIPS in February 1992 and contracted out much of their operations, leaving both government and civil society without a recognized focal point for peace initiatives or a counterweight to those claiming we need to be more fearful and ready to fight.

A citizen-based initiative to develop a national "department of peace" -- to be incorporated into the federal government along with other departments -- should be encouraged. Governments and citizens need a well-co-ordinated agenda for peace and supportive programs.

Canada could also support the campaign for a UN Parliamentary Assembly. Instead of having government representatives advocate for narrow national interests, we could elect Canadians known to think globally.

As peace and war are learned approaches, peace education should be a high priority. We might begin by introducing credible peace and conflict studies programs within our schools and universities. With non-violent resistance to bad regimes changing the contours of the world around us far more profoundly than militaries and wars, we need to devote more to understanding peaceful approaches.

More than a decade ago, Paul Rogers, a world leader in analyzing global security, identified growing inequality as the major threat to peace in the future. Positive peace depends on social justice. Notably, peace and conflict studies are unique in drawing the connection between Johan Galtung's conception of direct violence (war and armed conflict), structural violence (economic exploitation and political exclusion), and the cultural violence used to rationalize and justify both direct and structural violence, which are now conveyed as the norm in our politics, media, academe and many religions.

Thanks to feminist peace research, we're beginning to understand a male-dominated war system, with persistent efforts to prepare for more armed conflict and to diminish peace as an effeminate, lesser aspiration than militarism.

"Lest we forget" has renewed popularity, but most appear to forget or simply overlook the deeper meaning. Fifty-five years ago, Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with the warning: "The grim fact is that we prepare for war like precocious giants, and for peace like retarded pygmies." Transforming such an entrenched system won't be easy, but it's a critical task that begins with education. Isn't it about time we learned of cosmopolitan conflict resolution with its emphasis on proactive, preventive approaches?

Canada could also help to promote UN mediation. It's proven to be the most cost-effective form of peacemaking. In 2008, the UN consolidated expertise within a mediation unit, backed by both a quick response mediation standby team and a mediation support service. This effort recruited external talent, as well as many of the best and brightest within the UN system. To date, Norway, a relatively small member with a big heart, has carried the financial burden and helped to prevent numerous conflicts from escalating and spreading. It should serve as a reminder of how a lot can be accomplished with a little help.

UN peacekeeping continues to be the most cost-effective form of post-conflict stabilization, particularly when integrated with peacebuilding efforts. UN peace

operations have improved markedly over the past decade -- saving millions of lives and billions of dollars. Canada should restore our commitment to this worthy cause. The UN urgently needs help to manage 16 demanding peace operations. The Canadian Forces are well positioned to provide further assistance with tangible troop contributions, modern communications, surveillance and airlift.

Protecting civilians at extreme risk has been attempted in UN operations with mixed results since 1999. Yet the recent UN-authorized, NATO mission in Libya generated global concerns over both the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine and the initial, dubious means of shock and awe. The stark contradiction between a laudable norm and our existing tools now demands serious consideration of how, and with what, we "protect."

In the face of overlapping global crises -- accelerated climate change, rising inequality, food shortages, flooding, refugee flows, pressure on weak states, the proliferation of arms and the attendant probability of more armed conflict -- we begin to understand the need for a global "911."

A new UN emergency response force

The proposal for a United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) is intended to create such a "911" first-responder. It is designed to help prevent armed conflict and genocide, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up of demanding peace operation, and to address human needs where others can't, including services to address humanitarian, environmental and health crises. A UNEPS would involve about 16,000 dedicated UN personnel (police, civilians and military) recruited worldwide into a permanent, regional and gender-equitable standing formation at a UN base. They would be professionally trained and equipped, ready to respond immediately to critical challenges.

UNEPS might be a wise investment. It entails a start-up cost of about \$2 billion and annual recurring costs of \$1 billion, to be shared by 192 member states. Simply compare that with the \$30 billion Canada plans to spend on joint strike fighters, which will be much less helpful in solving future crises.

Notably, a UN Emergency Peace Service would provide the Organization and "we the people" with a far more rapid, reliable and legitimate deterrent to bad behaviour and war crimes. Finally, the UN would have a better chance to fulfill assigned tasks in maintaining peace and security, as well as the sort of over-the-horizon security guarantor that gradually offsets the need for 192 independent national defence establishments. Aside from helping "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and helping to transform a war-prone system, the potential cost-savings might really help.

We can also cover the costs of sustainable security and development, as well as those of global governance, by means of an international transaction tax (originally known as a Tobin tax and now often referred to as a Robin Hood Tax). This may yet generate the

extra billions in revenue required and put a much-needed damper on financial speculation and global arms sales. We will need more such steps if we are to curb the unwarranted influence of our military-industrial complex and the increasing disparities between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent.

Canadians have played a key role in numerous peace initiatives. Rather than await another war, genocide or humanitarian crisis that leaves governments scrambling to respond, we need a dialogue about new options. It's time to think about restoring idealism and how we might give peace a chance.

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