

Canada's Defense Policy: A Call for Strategic Discipline

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A Canadian flag patch is shown on an Armed Forces member's uniform in Trenton, Ont., in a file photo. The Canadian Press/Lars Hagberg



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Commentary

Canada is at a crossroads. Faced with an increasingly volatile global security environment and mounting domestic challenges, it must reconcile its ambition to be a credible international player with the hard realities of its limited resources and strained military capabilities. The choices made now will define not only Canada's role in the world but also its ability to defend itself in a rapidly changing

Share geopolitical landscape. The question is simple but profound: Can



Canada remain a reliable partner to its allies while safeguarding its own sovereignty? The answer lies in adopting a disciplined approach



to defense—one that prioritizes national interests, strengthens

alliances, and exercises strategic restraint.



For decades, Canada's defense policy has suffered from a dangerous imbalance. Lofty rhetoric about Canada's commitment to global



security has rarely been matched by adequate investment or effective execution. This discrepancy has left the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) stretched thin, underfunded, and increasingly unable to meet the

demands placed upon it. The Trudeau government's 2017 *Strong, Secure, Engaged* strategy sought to reverse this trend with promises of new equipment, expanded personnel, and a modernized Arctic defense framework. But seven years later, the results remain disappointing. Recruitment shortfalls, procurement delays, and aging infrastructure continue to plague the CAF, raising serious doubts about its readiness to meet even the most immediate threats.

The government's recent *Our North, Strong and Free* initiative is a tacit acknowledgment of these shortcomings. Released earlier this year, it places overdue emphasis on Arctic security, recognizing the region's growing importance in an era of climate change and great power competition. As melting ice opens new shipping routes, the Arctic has become a strategic battleground, with Russia militarizing its northern territories and China eyeing the region as part of its so-called "Polar Silk Road." Protecting Canada's Arctic sovereignty is not merely a matter of national pride—it is a strategic imperative. Yet despite the government's renewed focus, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Much of Canada's Arctic infrastructure remains woefully inadequate, from icebreakers and patrol ships to surveillance systems and runway facilities. Without significant

investment and follow-through, Canada risks losing its grip on this vital frontier.

The Arctic, however, is only one piece of the puzzle. As a founding member of NATO and an active participant in international coalitions, Canada has long taken pride in its contributions to global security. From peacekeeping missions during the Cold War to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and Latvia, the CAF has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to punch above its weight. These contributions have been crucial for maintaining Canada's credibility among its allies, particularly the United States, on whom Canada depends for much of its own defense. International engagement also provides Canada with a platform to project its values—human rights, democracy, and the rule of law—on the world stage.

But this legacy of global engagement comes with its own set of challenges. Canada's military capacity is finite, and its defense spending remains far below what is required to sustain its international commitments. At just 1.4 percent of GDP, Canada's defense budget falls well short of NATO's 2 percent target, a benchmark that most allies consider the minimum standard for credibility. While the government has pledged to increase spending, these promises often feel more like public relations exercises than meaningful investments. Chronic mismanagement in defense procurement has further compounded the problem, leaving Canada ill-equipped to fulfill its obligations. Delays in acquiring new fighter jets, submarines, and surveillance systems have become emblematic of a system that prioritizes bureaucracy over efficiency.

In this context, restraint is not just advisable—it is essential. A strategy of restraint does not mean abandoning Canada's commitments to NATO or shirking its responsibilities as a global actor. Rather, it means recognizing the limits of Canada's resources and focusing them where they can have the greatest impact. The Enhanced Forward Presence mission in Latvia, for example, is a model of strategic alignment. By contributing to NATO's deterrence efforts on its eastern flank, Canada bolsters alliance cohesion and demonstrates its reliability as a partner. In contrast, missions in regions with little

strategic relevance to Canada or with uncertain objectives—such as protracted operations in the Middle East—should be reevaluated. Canada cannot afford to engage in conflicts that do not directly serve its national interests.

The core of this recalibration must be a renewed focus on Arctic and North American defense. Strengthening NORAD, the joint Canada-U.S. aerospace defense system, should be a top priority. This means modernizing early warning systems, upgrading radar capabilities, and ensuring that Canada can respond effectively to potential threats from both state and non-state actors. The Arctic, too, demands urgent attention. As competition in the region intensifies, Canada must invest in icebreakers, patrol ships, and other critical infrastructure to secure its sovereignty and assert its presence. These investments are not optional; they are the price of maintaining credibility in a world where geopolitical rivalries increasingly play out in the polar regions.

Yet even the most well-crafted strategy will falter without a functional and capable military to implement it. The CAF is in crisis. Recruitment and retention have reached alarming lows, threatening the military's ability to meet its most basic operational requirements. Fixing this problem requires more than piecemeal solutions. The CAF must undergo a cultural transformation to make military service more attractive to a new generation of Canadians. This includes addressing long-standing issues of inclusivity, improving career development opportunities, and offering competitive compensation. Without these changes, the CAF will remain a hollow force, unable to fulfill the promises of Canada's defense policy.

Underlying all these challenges is a deeper issue: the lack of public awareness and engagement with defense policy. For too long, defense spending has been treated as a niche issue, overshadowed by domestic concerns like healthcare and education. While these priorities are undeniably important, they depend on a secure and stable foundation. A nation that cannot defend itself cannot provide for its citizens. Yet successive governments have failed to make this case to the public, allowing defense policy to languish in obscurity.

This is a failure of leadership, and it risks leaving Canada unprepared for the realities of a more dangerous world.

Canada's defense policy does not need a revolution; it needs a disciplined recalibration. By focusing on the Arctic and North America, modernizing its military capabilities, and engaging selectively on the international stage, Canada can remain a responsible global actor without overextending itself. Restraint, in this context, is not a retreat—it is a pragmatic response to the challenges of limited resources and shifting geopolitical dynamics. It is a recognition that Canada's strength lies not in trying to do everything, but in doing a few things well.

The stakes could not be higher. As geopolitical tensions rise and new threats emerge, Canada must act decisively to secure its borders, uphold its commitments, and maintain its place as a credible partner in an uncertain world. The choices made now will define Canada's role for decades to come. This is not the time for wishful thinking or vague aspirations; it is a moment for strategic clarity and disciplined action. Only by prioritizing what truly matters can Canada safeguard its sovereignty and ensure its security in the years ahead.

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